

“They laughed”
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
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Jesus rescues us from isolation

Introduction

It is hard being a person of faith. When you take your faith seriously, people look at you funny. They treat you differently. You're not always part of the gang.

Listen to Albert Schweitzer:

"He comes to us as one unknown, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew him not.

He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time.

He commands.

And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is. "

I. Jesus rescues the hemorrhaging woman and the girl who “sleeps”

1. Jesus rescues the hemorrhaging woman.

- 1) I had a patient recently in the hospital who was colonized by methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus. **MRSA**. Everyone who visited this patient had to put on a sterile paper gown, gloves, and a mask. Talk about isolation. When my patient most needed the warmth of human touch, she had to be isolated, due to something she did not want or cause. When someone with MRSA goes home, the stigma is gone. They are still colonized by MRSA, but the stigma is gone.
- 2) 2000 years ago, a certain woman has two stigma's against her: She is a **woman**, and she was **hemorrhaging** for 12 years. These are not stigmas in today's culture, but they are major issues 2000 years ago. A man 2000 years ago just does not touch a woman who is not his wife, and no one

touches a hemorrhaging woman. Neither of these stigmas go away when she leaves her physician's care. She is isolated from touch all the time. She is an outsider.

- 3) **But Jesus is a feminist.** I did not say feminine. I said feminist. One who believes in equality of the genders. Jesus is always in the process of passing through, and Jesus always stops and pays attention. She touches the hem of his garment and he heals both her physical illness, and her stigma.

2. Jesus rescues the little girl who sleeps.

- 1) **The dead** are also ritually impure in Jesus' culture. To touch a dead person is to become impure oneself. The community has written off the dead girl. We know this because they laugh at and ridicule Jesus when he says she is but sleeping.
- 2) **Jesus brings back** to life both the woman who has hemorrhaged for 12 years and the 12 year old girl. Brings them back to life in the community. He brings what he calls the "sleeping" girl back to physical life, and he brings the hemorrhaging woman back to life in the community. By destigmatizing them. By turning them from the outside to in. By turning the world upside down, and turning the woman and the girl outside in. You have heard the phrase, "inside out." Jesus brings the woman and the girl outside in.

3. In today's scripture, **Jesus rescues from two kinds** of isolation and death: physical death, and social death. **But** Jesus also rescues from another kind of death and isolation.

II Jesus also rescues Matthew from being an outsider

1. Jesus' culture shuns tax collectors. And so does ours.

- 1) **Jay Leno** tells us, "Bill Clinton says he **looks forward to the day a citizen can call the IRS** and get the right answer to a question." Says Jay Leno. "I look forward to the day I can call the IRS and get a voice that says, **Sorry, that number has been disconnected.**"
- 2) And there was that famous reply that boxer **Joe Louis** gave when a sportswriter asked, "**Who hit you the hardest during your career?**" His reply: "Uncle Sam."
- 3) By Jewish law a **tax-gatherer was banned from the synagogue**; he was included with things and beasts unclean, "Robbers, murderers, and tax-gatherers" were classed together.

- 4) For the Jewish culture into which Jesus is born, there **are two kinds of outsider:** the Gentiles, and the “αμαρτωλος.” The Gentiles are the non-Jews. Αμαρτωλος, a word frequently translated “sinners,” is probably **better translated “outsiders.”** The NRSV translates today’s text by saying **Matthew and the tax collectors are sinners.** But with this **alternative understanding of the word αμαρτωλος,** today’s text translates that Matthew and the tax collectors are outsiders.

2. A word about shunning.

- 1) **The Gentiles** are born into their status as non-Jews. **And the αμαρτωλος** are born insiders but move into the status of outsider. Move into their status **by one of two means.** By either **what they themselves do,** or **by what others do to them.** **Either way, the αμαρτωλος , like the Gentiles, are distanced from God and community.** Distanced at least in the eyes of the Jewish culture. The Jewish culture into which Jesus is born.
- 2) You might ask, **how does one become αμαρτωλος, an outsider?**
- i. **One way is by choosing** to run away from God’s table. Run away like the Prodigal Son. By choosing to run away from God’s call, God’s invitation, like Jonah.
 - ii. And sometimes, **without even consciously making a choice.** By becoming a lost sheep because of **head down nibbling.** Unconsciously following the grass. Unintentionally straying from God and community. Straying because of selfish, self-centered concerns. Concerned only about ourselves and our family. This straying, this turning away, this distancing ourselves from community and God, whether intentional or unintentional, is one way of becoming an outsider, or αμαρτωλος.
 - iii. But there is another even more egregious way. It is when we become αμαρτωλος, outsiders, **because of what OTHERS do to US.** We become outsiders when others exclude us. And we make others αμαρτωλος because WE exclude THEM.

It has been said that before you **draw a circle** around yourself and your friends, a circle that excludes others, you might take a moment for reflection. You might reflect upon whom you are including and excluding. And ask yourself with whom Jesus identifies himself, those inside the circle or those outside the circle. Jesus who says salvation is not for the self-righteous but

for the αμαρτωλος. Those who have been excluded as outsiders, distanced from God or community.

And there is a certain behavior we DO that relegates others to the status of αμαρτωλος. The status of outsider.

III There are 3 kinds of laughter.

It has been said that a laugh is a loud smile. And human beings love to laugh. The average adult laughs 17 times a day.

1. Victor Borge said, "**Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.**"

- 1) There is truth to that. **You cannot tense your muscles** while you are laughing. **You cannot feel hostility or stress** when laughing. When you share a laugh with someone, you automatically **lower your defenses** to them. **It has been said that when people are laughing, they're generally not killing each other.** Since the relaxation that results from a bout of laughter inhibits the biological fight-or-flight response, laughter indicates trust in one's companions.
- 2) **Many researchers believe the purpose of laughter is in making and strengthening human connections.** "Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter there is, the more bonding occurs within the group," say cultural anthropologists. This feedback "loop" of bonding-laughter-more bonding, combined with the common desire not to be singled out from the group, may be the reason why laughter is often contagious. The contagiousness of laughter is why they use laugh tracks in comedy shows.
- 3) Laughter, like the bird's song, functions as a kind of social signal. **People are 30 times more likely to laugh in social settings than when they are alone.**

2. What causes laughter?

- 1) Cultural anthropologists tells us the biological origin of laughter is the **shared expression of relief at the passing of danger.** Relief of tension.
- 2) **Incongruity** is the most common cause of laughter now. A **spasm triggered by when sense confronts nonsense.**

3) **But there is another, more sinister cause.** Aristotle wrote we also laugh at **inferior or ugly people**. Because we feel a joy at being superior to them. Laughing AT instead of WITH other people.

- i. **There is laughter that includes, and laughter that excludes.** Laughter that heals, and mean laughter that cuts our hearts. Laughter that saves, and ridiculing laughter that creates outsiders. **But Jesus identifies** with outsiders, the *αμαρτωλος*, and identifies with being the object of laughter, doesn't he? For the crowds laugh not WITH, but AT Jesus, when he tells them the young girl sleeps.
- ii. **Have you ever stumbled over the words** of our national anthem at a ball game? And were glad your stumbling was not heard by anyone? I saw a film clip recently which was hard to watch. It was a cut and splice of at least 5 shorter clips of people singing our national anthem solo and *a capella* in front of a microphone at various ball games. On each of these clips, the soloist forgot the words half way through the song. Some of the singers were children. And on each clip, the audience booed the singer. And laughed at the singer. In all 5 of the clips, the singer started crying. One of the singers tripped and fell on the ice at a hockey game while walking back to her seat. And no one tried to help her up. All of this was captured on video tape. I imagine that this ridiculing laughter cut so deeply, that each of these singers were scarred for life. **Some laughter creates community, but some laughter creates the *αμαρτωλος*, outsiders.**
- iii. **When Jesus**, who was just passing by in a crowd, continues on to the leader's house, he sees the professional mourners in place weeping because the little girl died. Jesus says, "Get out of here! The little girl isn't dead. She's just asleep!" And everyone started laughing at Jesus. **There are a thousand sermons in that one line. Laugh if you must but get out of his way. He is the resurrection and the life.**

3. **"Talitha cumi," he whispers in Aramaic. "Little girl, stand up."** And so she does. And so can you and so can I. We can stand up to anything that happens in our world that would deny any person equality, whether it's political or economic or social or religious, but we must always stand up from a kneeling position of humility and faith in the presence of the one who will touch us and make us whole-Jesus the Great Physician.

Conclusion

1. There are some for whom Jesus has never become a personal reality.

This is like the story of a bachelor who had a friend, an artist. One day he went into the artist's studio and saw a magnificent portrait of a lovely lady. He could not help but admire the painting. The bachelor asked if he could take it and hang it in his apartment. His artist friend suggested that he could do one better and introduce him to the lady. The bachelor at the time was not interested. Later, almost by accident, he did meet the lady and they were married. Then she moved into the apartment where her portrait was hanging. Before the wedding, the lady was just a painting - objective, formal, something to look at and admire. **Now she is one to know and love.**

2. How many of us have a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall of our minds? Could Jesus be just someone who looks good and one whom you admire? For you to know Jesus, he must come off the wall, step out of the picture and into your heart where you might know him truly.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...