

Pastor Daniel Waldschmidt
St. John's Lutheran Church
Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 9:9-13
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Imagine if someone were to go into a hospital and see all the sick and ailing people: there's a person with cancer in this room. There's a person who had a stroke in the next room. In still another room there's a person who has pneumonia. Imagine that the person goes up to the doctor and says, "Why are helping all of these sick people?" That would seem unmerciful and cruel. In our Gospel for today Jesus was trying to help the Pharisees see that when they asked him, "Why are you eating with tax-collectors and sinners?" They were essentially asking a doctor, "Why are you helping these sick people?"

The situation would be even more ironic if the person who went up to the doctor himself had pneumonia. The question he should be asking, the question you and I should be asking the doctor is: "Would you please heal me?" You see we are all sick with sin, but God's word today tells us that **Jesus is both the Doctor and the Cure for the Sin-Sick Soul.**

"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him." (Matt 16:9) Matthew was a tax-collector and tax-collectors were looked on as especially bad sinners for two reasons. First, they had a reputation for cheating people out of their money. For example, in Luke's gospel the tax-collectors say to John the Baptist, "What should we do?" And John tells them "Don't collect any more than you are required to." (Luke 3:13) You see the tax-collectors would frequently collect more than they were required to and pocket the difference. The second reason that tax-collectors were looked at as especially bad sinners is that they were working for the enemy, the Roman overlords. The Jews felt betrayed by their fellow Jews who were tax-collectors. They thought, "The Romans are the ones who are oppressing us and you're working for them!" And so it was surprising when Jesus actively sought out Matthew and said, "Follow me."

"Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples." After Jesus showed Matthew such amazing grace, Matthew threw a dinner party for Jesus and invited all of his friends. Matthew was like a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread. He was like a sick person telling other sick people where to find a free cure. Matthew was a dying man who had found a cure, or rather the cure had found him. And Matthew knew that there would be people in subsequent generations dying from the same sin-disease. And so he wrote down the cure for us in a book, the Gospel of Matthew. Gospel means Good News. Matthew wrote down for us the Good News about Jesus our Savior from sin.

I remember one summer in college I was working a roofing job. My only job was to carry bundles of shingles up the ladder to the roofers on the roof. One time one of the workers found out I was studying to be a pastor and asked me, "Why do you want to be a pastor?" And I said, "Well, I know how much Jesus has forgiven me. And so I want to tell other people that Jesus has forgiven them." That's the attitude Matthew had. He knew how much Jesus had forgiven him and spent the rest of his life telling people about the forgiveness that is theirs through faith in Jesus.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. Do ever notice that there are lots of instances in the Gospels where Jesus is eating? Jesus even says "The Son of Man came eating and drinking" (Matt 11:19). Why do the Gospels make such a big deal about Jesus eating? Well the Old Testament said that when the Messiah came, it would be like a great banquet. Like the passage from Isaiah that Pastor Lahmann preached on for Easter: **"On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet."** (Isaiah 25:6) But the

surprising thing was that when the Messiah came, by grace sinners got to eat with the Messiah. We are all sinners, but by grace and through faith we will get to eat with the Messiah at the banquet in heaven.

But not everybody was happy that Jesus was welcoming sinners. **“When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Matthew 9:10-11)** It’s important to note that we think of Pharisees as the bad guys because they opposed Jesus. But it’s important for us to realize in the society of that time the Pharisees were the upstanding citizens. Christians especially need to be careful of falling into the same self-righteousness as the Pharisees. Christians especially are tempted to self-righteousness, the tendency to point out the sins of others while ignoring the sins in our own hearts. We know that everyone needs Jesus. But we are tempted to think that other people need Jesus and his forgiveness just a little bit more than I do because I’m not as bad as he is. There’s a great communion hymn called “Jesus Christ Our Blessed Savior.” And one of the verses says, “Those who feel no pain or ill, need no physicians help or skill.” But of course we need the Physician’s help and skill just as much as the Pharisees did and just as much those tax-collectors and sinners who came to see Jesus.

Jesus eating with sinners reminds us to repent of self-righteousness. That’s not to say that Jesus condoned their sin. If you’re deliberately sinning and you have the attitude that says “I don’t need to change. No one can tell me what to do not even God,” then that itself is a form of self-righteousness.

So both outright sinners and self-righteous people are equally sick with sin. What’s the solution? You might think that the solution is to try harder. You might think, if I try harder then I can improve my life enough for God to accept me. But telling a sinner to save himself by trying harder is kind of like if a doctor would say to someone who has cancer, “Try hard not to have cancer.” The problem is deeper than trying harder. We’re not going to be able to save ourselves from this problem of sin. We need a Savior. And that’s why it’s important to say that Jesus both the doctor and the cure.

The cure for the sin-sick heart is not saying that the sin is OK. The cure for the sin-sick heart is saving ourselves by trying harder. The cure for the sin-sick heart is forgiveness. In the story right before this in Matthew, they brought a paralyzed man to Jesus and Jesus said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus cures your sin-sick heart by telling you: “You are forgiven.” He died on the cross and now you are completely, 100% forgiven. That’s what attracted the sinners to Jesus because with him there is forgiveness. That’s the cure for the sin-sick heart: it’s forgiveness. So if you are feeling crushed by your sin. If you’re like Matthew sitting at your tax-collector’s booth. Or if you’re like another tax-collector that Jesus talked about, hiding behind a pillar in the temple saying “God have mercy on me a sinner.” Then know that through faith in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross you are 100% forgiven.

One time Martin Luther said that “When you open the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him.” (LW 35:121) What Luther is saying is: See yourself as the person sitting at the tax booth whom Jesus comes up to and says “Follow me.” See yourself as one of those sinners who by grace gets to eat with the Messiah. See yourself as one of the sick people lying in the hospital for whom Jesus is both the doctor and the cure. Amen.