

Grace and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus is interacting with and healing several people who may not feel as if they have “a right to be there,” so to speak. They are people on the margins who may feel as if society thinks they don’t matter much or aren’t good enough. Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever wondered if you matter or if you deserve to be here? A lot of us feel that way at times. The world is so complex and large that many of us struggle for meaning. Many of us exist from day to day and wonder whether anyone out there thinks of us as important or even meaningful, anyone outside our own loved ones, anyway.

And this hasn’t changed much since the days that Jesus walked the earth. He, too, encountered many people who not only felt as if they didn’t matter, but the world and religious establishment had labeled them as unimportant. The first person Jesus comes across in our Gospel today is a fellow named Matthew. He was important in some ways - as a tax collector with a Roman soldier on either side of him, he had the right to enforce the taxes and to skim a bit off the top for himself.

But to his own people, he was a traitor, a disgrace to his family—who were forced to disown him—and he certainly would not have been welcome in a synagogue or any other place where the people he grew up with congregated. In fact, the rules were that those, like Matthew, who did the bidding of the Roman occupation by collecting taxes from his own people were considered as dead. Can you imagine being considered as “dead” by your own people?

I’ve heard stories of people who come out of religious cults or even highly fundamentalist churches who are treated like this today

by the groups they leave. This shunning rendered Matthew as a non-person in first-century Israel. Have you ever felt like a “non-person”? Although I don’t do it a lot, I love going to downtown Kitchener to visit with the pastors and deacons there. The churches are lovely and so are the people. But one thing that upsets me to the core is the number of homeless people.

In July, I went to visit with a pastor in Kitchener. Afterward, we walked around downtown, peeking into shops as we talked. And on nearly every corner were people sitting against buildings, dirty and dressed in rags. We passed one person, a woman who was weeping. I asked her if she needed help. She looked at me and said, “I’m just hungry, and I don’t like to beg.” I gave her \$20.00, not that \$20.00 will get you much these days. We live in a world filled with people on the margins, who may seem or feel like they don’t matter or at least, don’t matter as much as other people who have the money to pay for an expensive meal and a roof over their heads. I’d imagine that woman I met felt close to being a non-person.

The next people Jesus engages with in our lesson for today are other tax collectors and people whom the religious elite labeled as “sinners.” They were the people that Jesus went and had dinner with after calling Matthew to follow Him. The “sinners” were all those whose lives rendered them unrighteous considering the Jewish Law as the religious leaders interpreted it. An old phrase says: “We will be known by the company we keep.” And Jesus, became known and judged by the leaders of His day as a guy Who hung out with tax collectors and sinners—by the company He kept. Those who were righteous according to Jewish Law did not break bread with those who were considered outside the Law. And this is what Jesus was doing. And therefore, this caused the elite to judge Jesus as “outside the law” as well.

Have you ever felt as if you were judged as being “outside the law” of the church or of religious people? You are not alone. The Lord of the Universe was judged the same way when He came in the flesh. He can relate. As a matter of fact, Jesus was considered so far outside the law that He was deemed not good enough to live on this earth. So, they put Him to death by nailing Him to a Cross. There is nothing more ostracizing, more isolating, more self-demeaning than what Jesus experienced as He suffered alone and died alone.

It feels terrible when we feel family, friends, or the church do not accept us. Can you imagine what it must feel like to be so hated and outcast that you are killed because you are not wanted in the world at all?

The next person we encounter in our Gospel Lesson is a leader of the synagogue. His daughter has died and only as a father could, he searches for someone who might be able to help him. But in the first century, some might have asked, “Why?” Boys were the sought-after children. Girls could be bartered as brides, especially from upstanding families, but otherwise, they were often a burden, an inconvenience. Certainly, this girl, already dead, is of no consequence to most. But to her father and her mother and Jesus, she is a priceless vessel, a wondrous creation. Finally, to touch a dead body made a person ritually unclean. And Jesus touched her and brought her back to life.

And in the middle of this story is a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve miserable years. This bleeding was painful both physically and mentally. And it also would have kept her from being able to get married and have children. It also caused her to be considered ritually unclean. She was robbed of any kind of life, outside of begging. And the fact that she was able

to get so close to Jesus in a crowd of people emphasizes just how overlooked she was. She was considered unimportant by the people who knew her. In fact, avoiding her would have been the only thing that mattered. But Jesus lets her know that she is of great importance—of equal value to everyone else when He turns to her and calls her “daughter.”

Do you know what Matthew the tax collector, the sinners and other tax collectors, the young girl who had died and the bleeding woman all have in common? They were all “untouchables,” and were thus people without a place, a future, dignity. They were, in a very real sense, cut off from life. Their lives didn’t matter to the ruling class—and they got that message loud and clear.

Two cows were grazing in a pasture when they saw a milk truck pass by. On the side of the truck were the words, “Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, vitamin A added.” One of the cows sighed, turned to the other, and said, “Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn’t it?”

There are many people, structures and systems in this world that can give us the impression that we are inadequate... that we don’t measure up...that we don’t matter...that we are too defective...too broken...too sinful. But in God’s eyes, every one of us matters. None of us are trash to be thrown away or swept aside. None of us are unimportant, but many of us feel as if we are.

In our Gospel Passage Jesus does what He does throughout His 3 years of ministry—He reaches out to the unclean and the marginalized, He eats and lives with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers and so many others who were considered to be riffraff by the so-called respectable folks. And when the Pharisees saw this happening at Matthew’s house, they asked the disciples:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” At this point, the disciples don’t understand this any more than the Pharisees did, so they stay quiet. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks up: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Upon hearing this, the Pharisees must have not only been taken aback, but Jesus had hurt their self-righteous pride and egos. For Jesus was quoting what God said in Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:6-8.

These are the Pharisees. They are supposed to be the experts, not some low-class preacher from Galilee. “Go learn what God’s Word means when He says, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ for it seems that you don’t understand it at all.” In loving the outcasts, the marginalized, the so-called sinners, the ritually unclean, the poor, the disenfranchised, the forgotten, the hated, you and me even—Gentiles who have no place in God’s Kingdom, according to the sentiment of Jesus’ day--Jesus is interpreting the Law of God by His very life—and that Law is to Love God and to love your neighbor—and your neighbor means EVERYONE...as in “Ya’ll means all” as yourself!!!

In this world of ours there are many people who don’t feel as if they deserve help, or don’t deserve to be loved, or don’t deserve to exist. They have been told this either—in those exact words or by the way they have been treated, mistreated, ignored, talked about, referred to as...you name it! Perhaps you fall into this category. I know I have felt this way before. But it’s not true. And Jesus has come to heal all of us of this terrible disease of feeling of inadequate. In our Gospel, Jesus not only heals those who have physical problems, but these folks have other problems as well, whether they be spiritual or mental, you name it! As the Perfect

Embodiment of God’s Love, Jesus has come to make us whole by showing us how much we are worth to Him.

Some of us, today, are feeling inconsequential. This can happen as we get older, or when we lose a job, or just from living life in general. Jesus wants to and can and will make us whole. If you suffer, cling to your faith and pray. And by God’s grace through faith, you will be made well. It might not happen right away, but by giving everything over to the One Who Created this entire Universe and loves you so much that He knows how many hairs are on your head and not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him knowing about it...by trusting in His love for you with all your heart and mind, you will be made whole. For Jesus didn’t just love certain people, his unconditional healing, saving love is for all of us. Amen.