

Sermon – Proper 5A

The Text: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are questions which can seem silly, and yet which also lead to deeper reflection.

I think we all like to ask the question 'why?' Sometimes we might ask it as an accusation. For example, we might ask someone 'why did you do that?' in a certain tone of voice. However, often enough, we ask it when we genuinely want to know and understand. We ask it when we have no answer or explanation to give. 'Why?' is a common question in the face of pain, suffering, serious illness, and especially sudden death.

Asking the question 'why?' is one thing. The answer we get, if any, is another. Sometimes the answer given can be little better than nonsense.

For example, I could ask why the kettle is hot. There might be some people who would seriously explain that it was hot because it had recently been turned on, which had allowed electricity, produced by coal-fired power stations, gas-fired power stations, wind turbines and rooftop solar systems, to flow through the heating element and that heated the water in the kettle. That may be true enough, but maybe not so helpful and little better than nonsense. Someone else might have answered that the kettle was hot because they thought you might like a cup of tea.

In the gospel lesson, some Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" It's a very good question. Why does Jesus do that? However, before we think about the answer to that question, let's ask another very good question.

Why does the church exist? That question might trigger a few other questions in your mind. You might immediately jump to thinking about what you think the church is. We might think about buildings, or constitutions, or people in their Sunday best. You might also begin thinking about why you go to church. Why are you here, to listen to this sermon today?

Why does the church exist? This gospel lesson tells us that it's because of the compassion and mercy of the Father, Son and holy Spirit. Why does the church exist? Because God knows that you need it. Why does the church exist? Because our faithful and gracious God builds community based on respect, forgiveness and healing.

When those Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus heard them and he said "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Indeed, that's why there is a church. Jesus calls and gathers people to it in order to share his health and life with them.

I hope that we were all cheering inwardly, saying 'Go Jesus' as we heard the sorts of people that Jesus gathered, the sorts of people that will always be found in the church. I hope that we can be joyful and enthusiastic as we fully expect Jesus to gather more sinners, who might end up standing, sitting, and kneeling right alongside sinners like us.

In the Gospel lesson, we got a brief look at the church gathered around Jesus. As Jesus sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples (Matt 9:10). I hope we have a feeling of joy and familiarity as we imagine that meal, and especially those table guests.

Why does the church exist? It's because Jesus gathers sinful people into his presence and table fellowship to forgive them, heal them and set them free. Jesus has broken down the barriers that were thought to separate people from God. He willingly gathers people that some might think of as cut off and unclean.

The gospel reading revealed Jesus gathering, welcoming, touching, and being touched by the sort of people who were regarded, by the Jews, as cut off and unclean. Jesus gathered people who were assumed to be cut off from God.

Let's think about the people, in the Gospel lesson, to whom Jesus, the great Physician, brought healing and life.

First there was Matthew, who ended up as one of Jesus' twelve apostles. As we heard, he started out from his tax booth. In the gospel accounts we often hear of sinners and tax collectors being lumped together. Tax collectors were regarded as sinners, who were pretty much beyond hope. Not only were they universally assumed to break God's law by stealing, on top of that they were also working for the ruling Roman power.

Then there was the woman, who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. We might mostly think about how horrible, and perhaps painful it must have been, to be unwell and bleeding for so long. However, in Jewish society, her bleeding made her unclean. She, too, was a person who didn't really have access to God, according to people like the Pharisees.

Amazingly, she came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his cloak. Even if she couldn't come close to God in the temple, she had worked out she could get close to Jesus, and she trusted that just touching his clothes would make her well. We heard that Jesus welcomed the touch of that unclean woman and commended her faith. Jesus made her well. He healed her and set her free.

Then there was the dead girl. A dead person was regarded as being contagiously unclean. But Jesus didn't hesitate to touch her. He went to her, took her by the hand, and she got up. The contagion of death didn't make Jesus unclean. Rather, the healing power of Jesus spread the contagion of life. Jesus demonstrated that he had broken down the barriers that were thought to separate people from God.

Why does the church exist? This Gospel lesson tells us that it's because of the compassion and mercy of the Father, Son and holy Spirit. Why does the church exist? Because God knows that you need it. Why does the church exist? Because our faithful, gracious, and merciful God builds community based on respect, forgiveness and healing. Jesus, the great Physician, welcomes and gathers sinners and outcasts to give them his forgiveness, healing and life.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.