

Genesis 12:1-9
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX

In one of my former churches, I remember looking out on the congregation and noticing two women sitting in the same pew. One of the women was married; she and her husband had two beautiful children; she loved being a mother, and so, it came as no surprise that this woman took a Pro-Life stance. The other woman affirmed Pro-Choice, and she had exercised that option when she got pregnant in her teens while she was in high school; she felt that she was too young to marry and much too young to raise a child she could not support. No matter how you feel about those two entirely different ends of the spectrum, I tell you this; both women are children of God! And, both women had every right to be in the house of the Lord, seeking God and God's grace and finding God's mercy. God loves them both!

There's another church and two young women in the congregation have given birth to children out of wedlock. In one instance, the mother gave up her child for adoption. In the second case, the girl kept her baby, with the encouragement and support of her parents. The two families are now in conflict within the church, defending their separate decisions as the "most loving," thus dividing the congregation along with them. To complicate matters, the mother who kept her baby has requested that her child be baptized... and some of the church members have said they will walk out during the sacrament. Why? Because they do not want the church to sanction the promiscuous activity of young unwed mothers! (From Susan R. Andrews' sermon, "The Miracle of Grace," Lectionary Homiletics, June 2002, p. 15)

I share these tales of two churches with you in order to ask you this very important question: "In light of the reading from Matthew's Gospel for today, which congregation followed Jesus more closely and tried to learn (and practice!) God's desire for mercy more than sacrifice?" While both stories are somewhat shocking in terms of the ethical dilemmas involved and the choices made and acted on by the various women, nevertheless, the first story spoke about God's mercy and acceptance by others, whereas the latter one focused on conflict, judgment, and division between people - God and God's desires were ignored. I felt privileged to be the pastor of the first church. I would have been saddened and greatly troubled to be the pastor of the second church; and, I would have known that we really had our work cut out for us!

Both of those true stories help to set the stage for us to live within the biblical narrative of a day in the life and ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, we are encouraged to follow Jesus and "live outside the box" of society's norms, ritualistic traditions, and religious expectations. We are called by Jesus to move out of our comfort zones where we like to play it safe in order to follow in obedience, take risks for the sake of the gospel, and ultimately do what God desires - especially for the sake of others.

In the passage for today, the religious authorities were watching Jesus like a hawk; according to Jewish legal standards, Jesus couldn't (or wouldn't?) do anything right. Every which way Jesus turned, everyone he associated with and conversed with, every person he healed - was wrong, forbidden, outside the Law, and thus, they were thought to be out of favor with God. The Pharisees (and perhaps even Jesus' disciples) might have wondered if Jesus were having a bad day, a Murphy's law kind of day where everything simply went awry; Jesus couldn't win for losing!

However, on closer examination of the text, we realize that Jesus' words and deeds were deliberate acts. He really did mean to call Matthew the tax collector saying, "Follow me." He had a choice and he willingly chose to eat with Matthew, many other tax collectors, and sinners. Shortly after this, Jesus intentionally healed a woman, who had had an unclean flow of blood for twelve years. Then, to top it all off, Jesus decided to move beyond the prescribed norm and live outside the box of safe religious attitudes and practice by touching a defiled corpse, and then raising the little girl back to life.

But, to those standing close by, seeing and judging all that Jesus had done, they thought that Jesus had only dug the hole of controversy deeper and deeper! From their perspective of observing and keeping the law, there was a carefully devised system of "dos and don'ts," and nothing else would suffice to keep one pure before God. Tax collectors were notorious for collaborating with the Roman overlords, and Matthew and his kind were not above seizing opportunities for graft among their own people in order to pad their own pockets. When asked why Jesus ate with these scum of the earth and other sinners, Jesus answered that those who were sick needed a physician; likewise, those who were sinners needed a Savior, who dealt in compassion, healing, and unconditional love. And, those who thought they were well would be difficult to convince otherwise.

When the bleeding woman touched Jesus and made him ritually unclean, Jesus didn't rebuke her for her legal breach; he didn't chastise her for this affront. Instead, Jesus healed her, praised her for her faith, and removed her from isolation and restored her to community once more. And, when the leader of the synagogue asked Jesus to lay his hand on his daughter, Jesus didn't hesitate – even though such a thing wasn't done because of the impurity associated with touching a corpse. Jesus took the deceased by the hand; the power of God welled up inside of her, and she rose up.

What we see in this text, and what we are meant to understand as those, who have answered Jesus' call to "Follow me," is this: religious rules and regulations have their place and they point us in the right direction towards God. However, relationships trump ritual again and again. Jesus didn't come to toe the line and play it safe within carefully crafted rules, which judged a person either in (or out!) when it came to being loved and accepted by God. No, Jesus himself confessed that he came not to abolish the law (of God) but to fulfill it by emphasizing love over law, mercy much more so than sacrifice, and compassion, which has it hands-down over calculating who's in and out by counting the number of infractions.

Jesus lived outside the box, and he invites us to join him there and imitate him by reaching out to all others with godly love, merciful attitudes, and compassionate actions. Jesus reversed the accepted code of his day by deliberately choosing mercy and compassion over the politics of ritual purity. And, in doing so, Jesus proclaimed a way of life that unites and includes people, instead of dividing and excluding them. If we answer his call to "Follow me, we need to live out his ministry of reconciliation, live outside the box, and strive to accept and include all others with mercy and compassion. Jesus broke down the barriers that separated people, and he calls us to go and do likewise.

Following Christ can be risky – and even unsettling to move outside of our comfort zone - to give mercy or show compassion instead of just "fitting in" with everyone else. But, when we follow Christ and live outside the box of these four walls, we also open ourselves up to the very real possibility of living life as Jesus intended for us; and his way leads to abundance, joy, purpose, and fulfillment. When we move out into the unknown, we are in good company with Abraham, Sarah, Matthew, and many more. And, when we trust and obey and follow, we find ourselves in community with God and God's people. We are blessed, and, in turn, we become a blessing to others.

So very often, we think we have to do something monumental to make a big difference in the world. But Jesus taught us that what is done in compassion is more than enough! It can be as simple as a cup of water, a bit of food, a kindness offered to a stranger, a visit to someone, who is sick or in prison, or clothes given to the needy. When we live and serve in this fashion, our merciful deeds catch Jesus' eye. He invites us into community with him and others, who know they too are in need of the Divine Physician to heal their souls, and, who are needed by the Lord to reach out to and include others.

Will Willimon tells this story: Everyone else in her group at school left the new girl to herself at lunch. She was new, from another part of the world. She never spoke in class and when she did, few could understand her, with her strange way of talking, her accent. So when she got up and moved over to her table in the cafeteria at lunchtime, people looked up and noticed. Later, when one of the others asked, "What you doin' actin' so nice to that weird new girl?" she responded, "It just seemed like the right thing for me to do." "Why?" persisted the other girl. "I'm, I'm trying to be a Christian," she said in reply.

That's our calling as well – to try and do our best to be Christians! When Jesus says to us, "Follow me," we are to rise up and act just like Jesus by offering love, mercy, and compassion to others (especially those in need and those who are different from us). If we answer his call in that way, we will tear down barriers that divide, we will build up community with others, and we will give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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