

Indiscriminate Love
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

I've taken up a new past-time recently. Facebook. Yes, with prodding from my son, not to mention my OLDER brother, I joined the "online directory that connects people with friends and others who work, study, and live around them," to quote the website. It's so easy and quite fun. You develop a profile (listing interests, activities, favorite music, political perspectives; there's even a category for "religion"); if you want, you can upload a photograph (or lots of photographs!) of yourself. Then you begin to build a network of friends. You can browse others' networks, but in order to include an individual in your network you have to send an e-mail inquiry that says (I'm not making this up) "Louise Westfall has sent you a friend request." Click to "confirm" or "ignore." Unless the person confirms you as a friend, you can't view their profile or write messages on their wall. But once they do, you can chat away to your heart's content, as well as read others' comments on their "wall" or get an update of what your friends are doing. And there's almost instant gratification; in just two weeks I've gone from one friend to eight friends to 36...and counting (and trying not to feel jealous that Kurt Zitzner has 272!)

Facebook has become a cultural phenomenon, and say what you will about its disembodied, cyber-spatial aspects, is a powerful tool linking people in spite of miles, busy lives, and vast differences. Its enormous popularity suggests that it provides for Internet-savvy generations dynamic assistance towards answering those perennial human questions: *Who am I? Who are you? How can we connect?*

Think of the gospel reading for today as a fascinating look into first century Palestine's Facebook equivalent, and profiles of

some people we find there. At first glance, they seem to have nothing in common: they're of different generations, different socio-economic status. You might think twice about "confirming" their "friend requests." But in this text, each of them comes face to face with Jesus, and everything changes. Insights are gained...and new conflicts arise. Life is restored, and death is mocked. Well-defined boundaries are blurred, and healing occurs. Love is poured out abundantly and...well, indiscriminately. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 9th chapter at the 9th verse. [MATTHEW 9:9-13, 18-26]

As beloved children of God we welcome all persons to join our family of faith as full participants, regardless of age, race or ethnicity, national origin, gender, marital status, economic status, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, differences of thought and expression, or any other human condition. We celebrate and find strength in our diversity.

Last Sunday we considered Fairmount's new Diversity Statement and the way it helps us translate God's universal love for humanity into welcoming practices in our community's life and ministry. We spoke of how important such acceptance is for persons who are categorically excluded; specifically mentioning sexual minorities often denied full participation in the church including ordination. The gospel text we just read appears to confirm the righteousness of our perspective: here Jesus extends acceptance and healing to a tax collector, a religious leader, a chronically ill woman, and a 12-year-old girl. Pretty diverse. If those encounters were all we had, we could relax today, because surely our diversity statement has them covered.

Not so fast! The sermon germination group that explored this text noticed that the bridge between these separate accounts is an exchange Jesus has with the religious leaders, one of many about the same topic. The group wondered whether we too readily identify with the included ones, when we might actually learn something important from the religious leaders. Here

and throughout the gospels, it is the faithful who are troubled by Jesus' seemingly indiscriminate positive regard for people: all kinds of people. So let's think about these people for a minute through a contemporary lens.

Recall that tax collectors were the prototype "sinners" of the day. They had essentially turned their back on their own people, by putting their self-interest ahead of anything else. It would be something like Frank Gruttadauria being nominated for Fairmount's Session. Yet here Jesus calls such a one to be his disciple and heir to his message.

Then we meet a woman who had struggled with illness for twelve long years. The nature of her illness meant that she would have been excluded from public gatherings including worship; treatment of the chronic condition had exhausted her resources, we learn in Mark's parallel narrative. She was cut off from her faith community, friends, and financial security. The gospel writer intertwines her story with that of the father—a leader in the synagogue--- who comes to plead for his gravely ill daughter. Was he one who had grumbled at Jesus hanging out with the wrong kind of people? The two—poor, sick woman and wealthy, powerful leader-- have almost nothing in common, yet their mutual desperation and dire need connect them in ways they might never had imagined.

Returning to the religious leaders, we see that they were only trying to preserve the peace, unity, and purity of the Law. They wondered why Jesus didn't do things "decently and in order." If *anyone* can be a follower, if *no one* is shut out of the inner circle—then what's so special about it? Why would we want to join a club with so low an admission bar? We sometimes hiss the Pharisees as villains, but when you get right down to it, is the offense of inclusion really so hard to understand? Might these hard-working, high-achieving, law-abiding, church-going, upstanding citizens have just a teensy-weensy sense of entitlement to God's favor? Might we, too?

Of course, Jesus' indiscriminate love is extended to religious leaders, elder brothers and sisters, and spectacular super stars too, but we have a hard time receiving it. We've made our religion the old-fashioned way: *we've earned it.*

And to all of us, Jesus says *Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* He's actually quoting from the Pharisees' own scriptures, the ones they claimed so relentlessly to obey. The prophet Hosea spoke God's Word in a time of national apathy, when the people and their leaders were paying lip-service to the covenant, but not pursuing its demands for justice. Instead they were consumed with greed, in acquiring wealth no matter who they trampled on to get it, all the while going through the motions of religious devotion. The prophet tells of God's anguish over the state of things: *O, what shall I do with you, [my people]? Your love is like the dew that goes away early. . .* And then offers a remedy: *for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice; the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.* Religious ritual without righteous living is empty. Hypocrisy constitutes as profound a need as physical illness or moral failing. And who is innocent of that charge?

Fact is, friends, we can't earn God's blessing; we are not entitled to it by virtue of our goodness, our giftedness, our generosity, or anything else. God's love is for all, totally, equally, abundantly, indiscriminately. It's for children and dying people; preachers of tall steeple pulpits and postal carriers and prostitutes; Republicans and Democrats and people who don't vote; it's for the morbidly obese and people who smoke cigarettes and immigrants and misers and people with secrets. God's love is for glittering celebrities and buttoned down bankers and the kid who got kicked out of college. I think Jesus must have had a twinkle in his eye when he told the Pharisees to "go and learn" why mercy is more important than religion because if they did, they were going to make a whole lot of new friends!

Friends, our Diversity Statement is not founded in a sense of *noblesse oblige*. It is not a way to exercise control over who

belongs, and then pat ourselves on the back because we even welcome “them.” It’s finally not so much about *our* acceptance, but God’s. Divine, indiscriminate love that blows away “them” and “us” until we understand there’s only “us.” Different people and people with differences, united by a common need for God’s mercy and grace. We are welcome not because Fairmount Church says we are, but because God does.

A colleague described a statue his church had commissioned for the entryway just outside the sanctuary. It depicted Jesus kneeling before a basin with a towel in his hand, designed to recall the Last Supper, when Jesus did the work of a servant by washing the feet of his disciples. When the statue was installed, some complained that it should have been placed on a pedestal, because as it was all you could see was the back of Jesus’ head. The artist explained: You have to kneel down, or be down low already in order to see the face of Jesus. [quoted in *William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2008*]

You have to kneel down, or be down low already....the love of God is never clearer than in the face of vulnerability. And this goes counter to just about every piece of advice we’ve ever heard on how to succeed. *Never let ’em see you sweat. Watch your back. Keep a stiff upper lip. No, no, I don’t need anything.* Jesus showed us a better way by letting go of his divine rights and privileges and mixing it up with the likes of tax collectors, sinners, and other earth-bound, imperfect creatures. He became vulnerable so we don’t have to be scared to admit that we are too. And amazingly, graciously, God meets us in our vulnerability with healing grace and hope. The words of poet/singer Leonard Cohen resonate: *Ring the bells that still can ring; forget your perfect offering; There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.*

Turns out the call to Christian faith is an invitation to risk vulnerability --saying yes, like Matthew, to a future yet unknown but one that is certain to change us; asking, like the father and the bleeding woman, for healing. The Diversity

Statement is our church's Facebook profile, with a "friend request" sent near and far, including to you. Please accept it! You'll see the cracks in our hearts and lives, but that's how we receive the mercy of the Lord, who is our light and our salvation. Thanks be to God! AMEN.

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