

This gospel from Matthew consists of several different incidents. The first, the calling of Matthew, seems to be a bit different from the other two, which are miracle stories. They're put together because they have something to do with each other. The job this morning ought to be to figure out at least one thing they have in common. But I'm not even going to try.

The story begins with Jesus walking down a street and seeing a man sitting at a tax booth. This was a stall in the bazaar, not located inside a building as we would expect an office to be. An open stall, so that people who needed access to the tax collector, either to pay taxes or to borrow money, could do so. Through archeology we have recovered several of these tax booths. They're interesting affairs, the chair at which the tax-collector sat was fairly standard, but the table was made with a single spike at the bottom so it could be pushed into the dirt and then tilted to whatever angle one wanted. So, some advanced furniture design in the ancient world.

Jesus says to this tax collector named Matthew, "Follow me." In general, when Jesus calls people to follow him and they do so, they haven't done anything yet. Apparently, membership in the Christian community does not depend on making a grade of some kind or other. It's not "You're good enough, so you may be a Christian." It's "You are called, and then you become Christian." Goodness follows the call, but does not precede it. This creates an interesting little conflict in adult baptism and confirmation. Whenever I've struggled to prepare people for confirmation, for instance, they want to know, "How much preparation is needed? When do I know enough?" My response is, you already know enough. The only reason you're getting this so called confirmation preparation is that it's a good excuse to make another try at getting you educated about the church and the faith. But it has nothing to do with making you adequate to receive confirmation. What makes you adequate is the fact that God has called you. What's needed is not a conversation about whether you know the seasons of the church year, can name the 12 apostles or know the books of the New Testament in order. We ought to be talking about what it means to be called by God and has that happened to you. Then we might be doing something relevant to confirmation.

The point is that Matthew gets called before he does anything in particular except sit there, presumably engaging in shady financial practices and spying for the Romans. Frequently that's the way a call is experienced. It surprises you in the midst of what you are normally about.

The initiative in this call is God's. It is, after all, Jesus who sees and addresses the man Matthew. Sometimes in the New Testament it seems to happen the other way around. Zacchaeus, for instance, hears of Jesus and climbs into a tree to see him go by. Then and only then does Jesus call him. There the initiative is, at least somewhat, with the man. The contrast of these two stories points a good lesson: don't get caught in the trap of saying calls all happen one way. Diocesan Commissions on Ministry need occasionally to relearn this.

So Matthew just gets up and follows Jesus. Then the story goes on, after an obvious gap in the narrative: "As he (Jesus) sat at dinner in the house . . ." (By the way, Matthew's gospel

doesn't say whose house it is. There is a certain ambiguity the text here because strands from different stories have been woven together. I'd bet that in the original story whose house it was was carefully identified. But in Matthew's gospel we don't know whether it's Matthew's house or Jesus's house; there's no way to determine in whose house the meal takes place. The grammar of the passage will support either one.

The key is that the disciples are there. Jesus is there, along with all sorts of tax collectors and other undesirable riffraff. I don't know that the word "riffraff" is any less polite than the word "sinner" which is what the text says.

The Pharisees see this. Now we're not used to having outside observers present when we sit down to dinner with friends. We go into our houses, we shut our doors, and one needs to be able to see through the waist high weed patch in the front yard to know who is sitting at dinner. But, in the gospels we deal with a culture in which life is lived far more open to the street than with us. There is less privacy, there are archways into the inner court yards of houses, into the atrium. Anybody walking by on the street can see into the court where meals are prepared and eaten. If you close off the inside of your house so that no one on the street can see into it, you will come to the attention of the local Roman officials, who could well suspect conspiracy. It's better to continue old cultural habits and be public about it. (This throws light on another New Testament passage, the one about Jesus's instructions concerning prayer: Go into your home, and don't just pray in your own home, because if you do that you can still be seen from the street. But go into your home and go into an inner room, into a storage closet, and pray there. There you really can't be seen.)

These passages become a shade clearer when the increased degree to which life was lived in public is brought to our attention.

So the Pharisees are wandering past, see the dinner taking place, and say, "My goodness, the laws of propriety and religion are being violated." Now in what sense are these laws being violated? The question is: How do you fulfill the desires of God? You can tell a lot about religions by how they answer that. One common way of fulfilling God's desires is to try to create a community which works because it's doing what God wants it to do. How do you define such a community? Well, you have a set of rules which are believed to be of divine origin and you see to it that the members of the community live according to those rules. Adhering to the rules makes you holy. Not adhering to the rules makes you a sinner. We have just a few rags and tatters of this way of looking at things still hanging around Christianity.

This is the attitude of the Pharisees. Create an obedient community! You create a community which studies what one needs to do to please God and then tries its very best to do so. The radicalness of the New Testament, and of early Christianity, is shown in its disagreement with this.

Note that the collect and the gospel don't quite fit together. The collect says ". . . think those things that are right, . . . and do them." The gospel says, that when the Pharisees ask Jesus's disciples why their master isn't doing the right thing, Jesus turns on the Pharisees with anger.

Now the traditional way out of this tension between collect and gospel is, I think, inadequate. The traditional way is to say that the Pharisees weren't wrong in principle, only in detail. They didn't know the right thing to do, in other words, they had the wrong law or an incomplete law. What we need is, therefore, a better law.

But Matthew is called by God before he shows any signs of knowing anything about any law whatsoever. He just gets called. God establishes a relation with Matthew before Matthew does anything. To the extent that we understand Christianity as a response to being called, we have to say, "OK. Knowing the right thing and doing it happens to Christians on the far side of being called and responding." In other words, the collects are prayed within the Christian community and we assume that, for those who use them, the Christian foundation has already, somehow, been laid. The collects are not evangelistic or missionary pieces. They are intended for the members of an already established community, which is why they were written for use in the Eucharist, the worship, par excellence, of the established Christian community. The purpose of the collect is to help the Christian community understand its Christianity, in other words, who they are. The collect helps the Christian discern, explore and understand who she or he already is, what the community of the already called is. So call and response, the assumption is they have already happened and continue to happen for people who hear the collects.

For Matthew in today's gospel that assumption cannot yet be made. The Christian faith is frequently compared to a journey and on a journey one needs to do different things at different times in order to get anywhere. It is the job of a Christian community – and a competent spiritual guide of whatever form – to say "OK, now there is a flat trail ahead which is plainly marked and you can make progress safely and rapidly." Then, after that part of the trail, you may come to a thicket of vine maple growing across the path and the job of the director is to say, "Oops! If you continue to go at this speed you will get whacked in the face by a two inch bough. My suggestion is that you slow down and pay attention to what you are doing with your arms and legs." So, different kinds of actions, different sorts of responses are appropriate at different stages of the journey. Gospel call at one point, reflective collect at another. (And both points can occur within a single day.)

One of the jobs of the church is to present, in the liturgy, a rich enough background so that people who are at a number of different stages of the journey can find what they need to continue the trip. That's why it's hard to write good liturgy. It needs to be a suitable container for the lives of all sorts and conditions of human beings. It's hard to write anything that can do that.

The Pharisees say, "Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Notice here that the Pharisees are being very good proper near-easterners and are acting indirectly. Just the opposite of the way, in theory, we westerners prefer people to act. We get frustrated if people act indirectly. In near eastern cultures, they get frustrated if people act directly. So they don't approach Jesus directly with their concern, that would have been bad manners. They approach the disciples and ask them. That's proper, because the disciples can then ask Jesus and take his response back to the Pharisees. That way people lose less face if refused, because no refusal is direct.

Jesus, however, has never read the near-eastern equivalent of Emily Post. He answers directly, which violates just about every code of hospitality, good manners, and appropriate social relations one can imagine. He's just very rude. He says, "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." He doesn't tell the Pharisees that they are wrong. What he says, and this is an important distinction, is even worse. He says, "God is not concerned with you because you've got it right." "Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick." That's why I'm inside having dinner with these people who need the physician of souls. You're outside. I haven't called you, you're not invited to the meal because you don't need to be. The radical statement is: because you've got it right, God isn't interested in you. God is more concerned with the people who have it wrong. That's what it means to say God is merciful. God being merciful means that God is concerned with the people who have it wrong. So we Christians had best not ever get it too right.

The utter radicalness of this passage is frequently glossed over. The implication is that the Pharisees are those who have no need of a physician. Because they have no need the physician goes those who do need him. So what's wrong with the Pharisees isn't what they are doing. Jesus doesn't say you are acting unrighteously. He says something worse: You don't know who God is. You do the right things, but you do not understand God; in your rightness you are wrong. Therefore go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

If anything, Jesus accuses the Pharisees at their point of utter vulnerability, their claim that their rightness gives them knowledge of God. God is more concerned with tax collectors and sinners because they need him more. I can't see any other way of understanding the passage: Go, learn what this mean, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. God is more concerned with the folks around the dinner table than with those carping through the doorway.

"I've come to call, not the righteous, but sinners." If we take that at its face value, the Pharisees are already righteousness and, therefore, they don't need to be called by God. What's God supposed to be doing? Helping sinners be different than they are. If you can do it on your own and present the results to God as an offering, a sacrifice, why should God bother with you? If you claim to be able to do it on your own, where is there room for God's mercy?

Thus we come to the utter weakness of any scheme of pleasing God by figuring out what he wants and giving it to him by doing it and offering him our obedience, our successful morality. It separates us from mercy.

There is an inadequate but illuminative parallel to this in teaching. There are some educational institutions which make sure they chose their students from the very best. If you chose from the very best, it's hardly to your credit to point to the student's subsequent success. They will be successful no matter what. The educational institution can only claim that they might not have been quite as successful without them. But the test of a top notch, first class, educational institution is the ability to take doubtful material and make it work. If you can take people who, left to their own devices, might not make it, and help them make it through the resources you provide, that is a significant achievement. Apparently, God is interested in

significant achievements, in helping us become what we couldn't be on our own.

And Jesus is saying God is like that. Those who will make it on their own ought to just get on with making it. But those in whom God is interested are those who won't make it without him. If you offer your rightness, your righteousness, to God, it is a statement that you don't need his mercy.

I happen to hold a firm belief that without outside help none of us make it. So the distinction here needs, perhaps, to be broadened. But I run into people frequently inside the church, who believe that, somehow, they've got it right. This belief shows up in all sorts of ways. Maybe in believing that the church has to use the same patterns it has always used – God can't change the rules of the game, especially if they are rules to which I'm accustomed. (Whether they were ever God's rules in the first place is another, and by no means trivial issue.) We've seen what happens with this. The ordination of women is a sound example. It was assumed for centuries that the non-ordination of women was a part of the structure of a godly universe. Then, it seems, on pragmatic examination, to have been not at all so. There's an example of the assumption that we know what is what. On the other hand, I've heard plenty of people say that in order for the church to be the church it must engage in this or that sort of social action. But not necessarily. If you are called to a particular action of mercy don't identify your mission with that of the whole church. The whole church's mission is to enable yours, not put all its effort into doing it alongside you.

So, in a sense, all of us need to understand ourselves as in the position of the people around the table eating in this gospel story, not looking through the archway into the atrium. As soon as the church moves away from a primary concern with what you need to be and do to be eating at that table and receiving God's mercy, whenever we move out of that as a primary focus, we move into troubled and dangerous waters. When it's not "What do we do to receive God's mercy?" but, "What do we do to get the institution to work?" we are in trouble. When it is not, "How can we be open and receptive to God's mercy?" but, "What does success look like for us and how do we get there?" then we are in trouble. There is no way around it – in living or in dying – openness to the mercy of God has to be the heart of the life of the church, and nothing else can be that heart.

I was thinking of talking a bit about the two miracle stories, but you've heard enough for the day and you may consider my ending here to be my little quasi-silent protest against putting too many different stories in the gospel lesson.

Please stand for the creed.