

Proper 5A: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Cross Contamination

You all know that one of my interests as a priest is the connection between art and theology, how artists visually convey biblical truths. And I spend a good amount of time each week looking for artworks to illustrate the Sunday Scripture lessons. Even when I can't find artwork, I like to imagine what an artist might do with a particular passage, how they would tell the story through form and color. I consider what subjects they would focus on, what medium and style they would use, whether they would portray the scene historically (taking place in ancient Israel) or try would contemporize it (make it as if the story took place today).

For example, for today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel. I can see an artist painting the story this way. Imagine, if you will the interior of a diner. It's early lunch, and there's a group of people just finished eating, sitting around a cheap Formica table. At the center you've got a pale young man in a stained undershirt, skeletal-thin from years of heavy drug use, slouching back in his chair. Next to him is a bleary-eyed man in a black polyester suit over a bright red dress shirt, heavy gold chain around his neck. He's leaning forward on his elbows in his chair, cigarette dangling from his mouth. Behind him on the bench is a woman in heavy makeup but decidedly lighter clothing, one hand waving excitedly over her head, careless of those around her, the other hand resting on the shoulder of the man in the black suit, evidently her pimp. In the forefront sits a young black man, tattoos covering his arm, cornrows running down his head. There's a glint of gold in his teeth, and a discernible bulge in the back of his pants, indicating that he has not come unarmed. He's hunched over a chair turned backward, eying the painted woman. On his left is another woman who's far less made-up. She wears a shapeless, ragged coat and a skirt that has been stained by something dark and wet. You can't tell her age, but you can tell the years have been rough. She looks like someone you've seen before, huddled over a trashcan fire or pushing a grocery cart full of junk. A young girl, maybe twelve, lies flat out on her back on the bench behind them, her arm dangling to the ground. It's not clear if she's dead or just sleeping. Standing above them is a tall, lanky fellow, sporting an apron and short goatee, greasy hair pulled back in a ponytail. He could be Hispanic or maybe Middle Eastern, you can't tell, but clearly, he's the dishwasher, because he's got a bussing-tray on his hip and he's reaching for the dirty plates on the table. The whole bunch there looks like something the cat dragged in.

That's one side of the canvas. On the opposite side is another group. Those in this party are all well-dressed, in suits and ties, women with their hats and their Sunday best. All have good teeth, and there's no dirt under their fingernails. They've evidently just come from church, as one of them is carrying a Bible. They're just coming through the door when they eye the others sitting at the table. And the look on their faces is a mixture of shock and disgust. One woman clutches her purse, and another turns around, sure this is not an establishment she wants to eat at.

This is how I'd paint this passage if I were an artist. A diner scene, with two groups, one a respectable, well-dressed, church-going bunch, the other far less reputable, a gang of ne'er-do-

wells and undesirables. Each of them has a story, of course, just as each of the characters in our Gospel lesson has a story—Matthew, the tax-collectors and sinners eating at his house, the Pharisees looking askance, the desperate father, the woman with an issue of blood, and the dead young girl. What my imaginary painting conveys visually in an instant, the gospel conveys in a narrative sequence, with Jesus encountering one person after another who need his help.

Besides their need of Jesus, though, what unites these various characters in the Gospel is something that is not immediately visible to us because we do not live in first century Israel. It's that all of these folks (save for the Pharisees) would be considered "unclean" in Jesus' day, untouchable, impure.

You see, the ancient Hebrews had strict rules about cleanliness and uncleanness, things you could safely touch and others that if you touched them, you'd be considered sullied or unclean. And anything that you touched would be considered unclean too. You could transfer your uncleanness. On one level, this makes sense. Germ theory had yet to be invented, and hygiene as we conceive it was all but unknown. But the Jews' sense of "clean" versus "unclean" went beyond physical health. "Unclean" didn't mean simply "dirty" like a 4-year-old playing in the mud, but more like the phrase "dirty, old man." The term carried with it a moral, relational, even theological import.

Written as it was in the Law of Moses, at its core cleanliness for the Jews had to do with being in right relationship to God. Being unclean was the opposite of being holy. Anything unclean was unfit or unworthy to be in the presence of the holy God. If, for whatever reason, you became unclean, you had to go through a rite of purification or cleansing in order to be welcomed back into the community of God's people, into the presence of God. Hence, being unclean or impure was a big deal. If you were a Hebrew, an Israelite, part of the *holy* people of God, you had good reason to steer clear of "unclean" people and things.

Two of the people Jesus encountered in today's reading were immediately subject to this rule. First, the sick young girl. She was by the time Jesus found her dead. So when he took her hand, he was touching a corpse, which is unclean according to Jewish law. But so too would be the woman with the issue of blood. Matthew doesn't say it outright, but she suffered from what we might say was a "female problem." And according to ancient Jewish law, such a woman is considered unclean for as long as she was bleeding. Bad enough for the regular monthly cycle but, for this poor woman, it meant that for twelve year, no one would go near her, lest they become polluted, through contact with her or with anything she touched. You can imagine the pain and mental anguish this isolation brought her.

But this woman wasn't the only character subject to "social distancing" in this story. Before the bleeding woman reached out to touch Jesus, he had been eating dinner at Matthew's home. Now, Matthew was a tax-collector, And tax collectors were not people any decent person would associate with. They were employed by the occupying Roman government, and so were considered traitors for colluding with their oppressors, doing their bidding, and worse, exploiting their fellow Jews by demanding more than was required and pocketing the difference. So, tax-collectors were not popular people. Indeed, they were shunned, ostracized, along with those the gospel writer calls "sinners," a blanket description that includes anyone who'd transgressed the laws or mores of

Jewish society. Indeed, the Pharisees were speaking for all decent Jews when they asked why Jesus was associating with these “deplorables,” these degenerates, these “dirty” people.

Now, we may think we are not like, that we today are more enlightened and morally superior than the Pharisees. We pride ourselves on being open-minded and non-judgmental. But we are not. Remember how we used to shun people who contracted AIDS. People feared they’d catch the disease just by touching them or drinking after them. Or more recently, consider how we Americans treated each other because we feared they might have Covid and give it to us. Politicians, pundits and even some doctors encouraged us not just to look after our own health but to look down at those who refused to do what the government told us to do, treating dissenters as not just mistaken or ill-informed but immoral. Such people were insulted, maligned, their voices silenced, threatened with losing their jobs, disqualified from surgeries, simply over whether or not they submitted to the shot. Now, I know many of us have lost loved ones to Covid, and I don’t mean to say anything about the risk Covid presented or the efficacy and safety of the therapies that were urged on us. My point is rather about how we treated others in the midst of the pandemic, how our fears and concerns led us to shun and dehumanize those we considered “diseased.” We are not as morally advanced as we think. We are subject to the same impulse to despise those we consider “unclean.”

So, what then are we to do? What do we learn from these vignettes in Matthew’s account? Well, where is Jesus in this story? Notably, in each instance he’s with the rejected, touching the untouchable, embracing the unlovable. To go back to that picture I painted for you, Jesus is not with the upright, decent churchgoing crowd. He’s the dishwasher who’s come out to serve the disreputable bunch, to help clean up their mess.

[Needs rework of transition, argument here]

What we see here is that, contrary to what we might expect, Jesus’ encounters with the unclean—the sinners, the sick, the dead—do not contaminate him. Rather they were themselves decontaminated—cleansed! With Jesus, the normal rules of uncleanness are reversed. Jesus doesn’t become unclean by contact with unclean people. Instead Jesus’ holiness makes them clean. Instead of life flowing out of the woman in her blood, life now flowed into her from Jesus. Instead of Jesus becoming a sinner, sinners like Matthew learn to be more like him. Instead of people’s impurity contaminating him, his holiness “infects” others. His holiness is literally contagious.

In the food service industry, you’re taught to be careful of spreading germs from one food to another by using the same knife or cutting board without cleaning it in between. It’s called cross-contamination. Well, Jesus has come to effect a “cross contamination” of a different sort. On the cross, Jesus, he takes our uncleanness and we become pure. takes our sin upon himself and we receive his life. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) The prophet Isaiah put it this way: “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole.” (Isaiah 53:4-5) On the cross, our sins, our uncleanness is transferred to Jesus, and Jesus bestows to each of us the cleansing wholeness of God.

The point of all the vignettes in our lesson this morning is then to show who Jesus is and the saving, healing grace he has come to share. By eating with sinners, healing the bleeding woman and raising the dead girl, Jesus shows that God cares about those who suffer, those who are sick, the unclean, those ostracized from society, the spiritually dead. Jesus does not forsake us in our pain, but has come to us to “infect” us with his life and holiness. So, if we find ourselves in need, outcast, shunned, in pain and sick, Jesus bids us to come to him for healing.

Many churches have responded to this promise by starting “healing prayer ministries,” praying and laying hands on those who are sick. And I’ve known a number of people who have been healed this way, through their own prayers or more often through the prayers of others—healed of backaches, infertility, brain tumors, athletes’ foot, cancer. And these weren’t the sort who would normally buy into healing prayer and the working of the Spirit, who are looking for miracles everywhere. Yet they can witness to the power of God, the power of his healing, in their life.

So, this story is about Jesus, yes, but it is also about us, the Church, and our mission. We who have caught the ‘Jesus bug’ are supposed to spread it. Our job is to “cross contaminate,” to infect others with Jesus’ “good infection,” by healing the sick, touching the untouchable, and making clean the unclean. By this, we witness to the Kingdom of God breaking in, breaking into our world of death and disease and healing all creation—our souls and bodies and communities. We live in a sin-sick world, but Jesus is the Great Physician come to make us whole again. And, for that we can say, Thanks be to God!