

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of June 14, 2009

The Doctor is for the Sick (Matthew 13:9-13)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with Him and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

This is our text.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, A good physician is most concerned about the patient's need. Shortly following the Second World War, a group of physicians from 27 countries shared this deep concern. Moved by a desire to improve the standards of medical practice of physicians worldwide, they met together in Paris in 1947 and formed an organization called the World Medical Association.

This Association then drew up ethical guidelines for all physicians worldwide and prepared a "Charter of Medicine". This was to be an oath or promise made by every doctor in the world upon receiving a medical degree. Among other things, in this "Physician's Oath", a doctor makes this promise, "I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity, the health of my patient will be my first consideration".

In today's passage, our Lord Jesus Christ truly lives up to this promise and much more as the Great Physician to the world. For the spiritual health of the world is His first consideration. Indeed, He has come to heal the spiritually sick and to call sinners to the blessed eternal life, found in Him.

The day Jesus called Matthew to be His disciple was the best day of this tax collector's life. The Lord called him to a new life of purpose in His kingdom. He called Him from death to life, from bondage to sin to true freedom and peace, and from darkness to light in the fellowship of Christ. In Christ Matthew became a child of God, a saint, a servant of the Most High God of love, and an heir of the everlasting Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus came into his life Matthew wanted to celebrate and have a feast in honour of the One who had given Him new life.

Now Matthew was a tax collector and tax collectors worked for the Roman Empire. Because many of them demanded unreasonably large payments from the people, they had a bad reputation and many Israelites considered them traitors. They were outcasts

as far as many people were concerned and so, Matthew's friends were fellow outcasts. The Pharisees on the other hand, were the most respected men of Israel and they saw themselves as a step above the majority. When the Pharisees saw Jesus eating, drinking and having fellowship with these open "sinners" they were appalled. They said to His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" \

This was not the way of the religious teachers. They believed that associating with 'sinners' made them unclean as well. The Pharisees would not touch tax collectors and other outcasts with a ten-foot pole and they condemned Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard for spending time with them. Teachers of the law were to keep themselves pure at all costs and to steer clear of the unclean.

However, our Lord does just the opposite. He reaches out to the despised, to the unclean, and to the spiritual lepers of this world with mercy. Jesus gives grace to those who acknowledge their sin and turn to Him for mercy. This is what happened with Matthew and his fellow outcasts.

Like us, they were wicked and unclean and yet God accepted them as righteous because of Christ. Ironically, the Pharisees, who were supposedly the righteous ones, turned away from God's grace because they would not acknowledge their spiritual sickness and their need for Jesus' healing forgiveness. Sadly, they thought of religion as little more than a list of things to do, as simply a set of rules.

In fact, they even invented extra rules in the hope that these would keep them from breaking the set rules. In essence, they built a fence around the Ten Commandments and lost the whole spirit of the Divine Law. Sadly, the teachers of the Law in Jesus' day forgot that the essence of Moses' Law was love.

When Jesus came He pointed people back to the heart of the Law and boiled it down to two commandments: To love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. If love was simply about following rules, then we could program a computer to love.

Our Lord shows what love is. St. John says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). Jesus loves you and the whole world with all of His heart, soul, mind and strength and He showed the full extent of His love on the cross.

In the sixth chapter of Hosea the Lord says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings" Just as our Lord showed us mercy by His death and resurrection, He us to show this same spirit of mercy to others. It is easy to fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and make our right standing before God all about things we do; about praying the right prayers, about going to church and joining various committees.

We must be careful not to do these outward things for the wrong reasons. If we take pride in these outward things and do them simply to impress others and make ourselves feel righteous, then we risk our salvation. We need God's mercy in the cross of Christ.

We must hold firm to Christ's mercy so that our love may not be like the morning mist and the early dew that disappears, but that we may reflect His steadfast and ever-present love. Friends, it is important to remember that God does not need our money, our prayers, or our good works. He is almighty and quite self-sufficient.

However, our neighbour desperately needs these things. We need each other's forgiveness when we err and we need one another's encouragement and support in the faith.

Dear friends, Jesus is the only naturally righteous man who has ever lived. He is altogether pure with righteousness whereas man is altogether stained with sin. His holiness is as far above man as the stars are above the earth. Yet, His steadfast love for you moved Him to come down to this smelly world and to live among the wretched. He did not hesitate to welcome the lowly, to love the unlovable, and to say, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (Jn. 6:37). Jesus did not come to stand far off but to be our Good Friend, to bring us close to God, and to be with us now and always. We see this in the Lord's Supper, where the Lord communes with us and welcomes us to the Heavenly Banquet just as He welcomed Matthew.

Martin Luther once said, "Sinners are lovely because they are loved; they are not loved because they are lovely". How true this is! On our own, our souls are marred and hideously disfigured with sin and yet through Christ, in God's grace we are considered to be lovely and righteous as He is righteous. This is called 'imputed righteousness'. Jesus' love shown in His death and resurrection has made you lovely in His sight and His exquisite love that lives inside each of us is moving us to reach out to those whom we would normally avoid.

St. Francis of Assisi, Italy, who lived in the 1200s, is a good example of this. He had a natural phobia of lepers and one day while he rode through the countryside, Francis came face to face with a leper. His first instinct was to avoid him. Instead, Francis jumped down from his horse, embraced the leper and kissed his hand. Immediately, he was filled with joy and from then on, Francis decided to take every opportunity to care for lepers.

He said that he saw in them the poor and crucified Christ. And so the Lord led him to serve the lepers. We may not have the chance to reach out to lepers, though everyday our Lord presents us with opportunities to show kindness to people we naturally might dislike. In fact, in saying a kind word or giving a hand to someone who has wronged us most closely reflects the love of Christ. After all, He died for sinners, His enemies.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, a doctor cannot heal someone who does not want to be diagnosed, who does not think he is sick. This is why we confess our sins. We give them to Christ; we lay them before His cross and let the Great Physician heal us with His Word of mercy. This is the healing God desires for all of this hurting world. And this is the healing we are blessed to share. Amen.