

Yr. A, Proper 5
June 11, 2023
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Christ Episcopal Church
1622 words

Lessons: Hosea 5:15-6:6
Psalm 50:7-15
Romans 4:13-18
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

My sermon-writing desk is beneath a window on the front wall of our home. As I was praying about these lessons, I looked up and noticed an unusual thing—a woman was walking with two young girls, one on either side of her. She was holding hands with *both* of them. “Hmm,” I thought, “there’s not any dangerous traffic...and the children are plenty old enough to walk without her help.”

My first guess was that perhaps the two girls are neighborhood friends who got into trouble and were being brought before the other mom for—you know—a little...‘prayer meeting.’ I’m sure I thought of this because when *I was a boy*, my mamma took *me* and my childhood friend by the hand to go see his mother for that *same kind of meeting*.

Well, this is exactly what the prophet, Hosea, is doing in today’s Old Testament lesson. He has the Israelites by the hand and has dragged them before the LORD. First, we listen to the LORD, who predicts, “The Children of Israel are about to beg for my favor.”

And then we hear Israel’s confession as well as their *hope* of forgiveness: “The LORD has torn us,” they cry out. “*And* he will heal us.”

“The LORD has struck us down,” they lament, “And he *will* bind us up...he will *raise us up*.”

God just sounds exasperated. “What shall I *do with you*, O Ephraim? What shall I do with *you*, O Judah?”

The LORD is upset because the Children of Israel have *not* loved God with all their heart. And *neither* have they loved their *neighbors* as much as themselves. God cuts to the chase about what God wants from his children. “I desire steadfast love,” says the LORD, “not burnt offerings.”

Did you notice how the Psalmist is tuned in to this *same idea*? He sings of the frustration our LORD feels about ‘empty’ expressions of worship... you know, how we want our worship *one day a week* to ‘make up’ for the *other six days* of the week...our judgments of those who differ from us, our greed and arrogance, our lack of empathy for people in need.

Well, this is definitely the most sassy of all 150 Psalms. You gotta’ love how our LORD says, “I will take no bull from you. All the beasts are already *mine*! (And) If I *were hungry*,” says the LORD, “I would NOT *tell you*. Do you think I (actually) *eat the flesh* of (your sacrificial) bulls or *drink the blood* of (your sacrificial) goats?”

This Psalm begs the question from us. “Well, what *do you want*, O LORD?”

Here’s the plain and simple answer: “Offer to God a sacrifice of your...*thanksgiving*, and make good on your vows to the Most High God.”

Then the LORD says, “Call upon me *whenever you’re in trouble*. I will deliver you, and (then) *you* shall honor *me*.”

The promise of Psalm 50 is so true. If you read to the end of the short book of Hosea, You will *clearly see* the character of our LORD—longsuffering, abounding in mercy, and full of great kindness.

In other words, we have the gift of a steadfast, kind, and loving Parent who will *never give up on us...never let us go*. (Let that sink *in*, or you'll never understand today's Gospel lesson.)

I was wrong about the two neighborhood kids. They were *not* being dragged before another parent for judgment. About twenty minutes later, they returned home, **still** holding hands. It was obvious that they are two young sisters, blessed with a tender, lovin' mama. And that made me think of Jesus...in today's Gospel lesson.

You *realize* the total scandal of Jesus calling Matthew to join his team, don't you? Matthew was a tax collector, which means—*he's* a guy whose hands are *really dirty*. See, people who chose to become tax collectors, they were basically traitors. They chose to work for *Rome* by extracting money from their own Jewish neighbors, *and*...skimming a nice little cut right off the top!

It would be like citizens of Ukraine, working for the occupying Russian forces, making *good money* collecting tolls from their own people, and then sending the proceeds to Moscow. *This...is the kind of person* whom Jesus *took* by his dirty, little hand, and said, "Follow *me*."

The next thing you know, there's a whole bunch of these filthy tax collectors, *and* other sorts of...*unacceptable people*, hanging around the dinner table with Jesus.

Now, bear in mind that *their* dinner table was nothing like our 21st century, American, middle-class dinner tables. *We* have the benefit of a nifty concept called 'personal space,'...which is demarcated by individual chairs...and individual *placemats*...and our own *personal* plates...**and** forks.

When is the last time *you reclined* on a bunch of pillows, scattered across the floor, and put *your hand* in the same big bowl as *everyone else* at the party? When is the last time *you lounged* alongside people with questionable morals? Have you 'rubbed elbows' lately with people who are considered outcasts, or passed a common cup around a table with prostitutes?

See how *disturbing* that all sounds...to *good people* like us...to *good people* who follow the rules...like the Pharisees did?

Y'all, there's only *one way* to describe Jesus Christ, in light of the facts contained in today's Gospel story. Jesus Christ is a person who shows a **profound** lack of *judgment*. We need a moment here, because that statement is mostly expressed as a criticism.

But when it comes to the Son of God, we can *all be thankful* that he often operates with a profound *lack of judgment!* It's obvious that *all* are welcome at his table. And this presents a special challenge to those of us who like to think of ourselves as good people. Are we going follow the *challenging* example of Jesus...**or** are we going to ask the *reasonable question* that the Pharisees asked? "*Why...does he do this*" *Why...should we...do this?*

One of the things I love about The Episcopal Church is that we welcome everyone. The sign says it plainly, "The Episcopal Church welcomes you." No if's, and's or but's. **No** conditions. If all sorts of sinners were good enough for Jesus, then we reckon, they're good enough for us. We try to start with the idea that we *all* need the healing Jesus so freely offers. We *all* need the mercy of a Savior who does not *pre-judge* any of us.

Incidentally, one of the main reasons people give for quitting the Christian faith (and there are a lot of people quitting the faith right now) is that they see the people *inside the Church* judging the people *outside the Church*. In other words, when they look at the most conspicuous and loudest Christians, they don't see **Jesus welcoming sinners**. They see a bunch of **Pharisees**—*judging sinners*.

As many of you know, this is Pride Month. There's a meme going around on social media that says, "I would rather be *excluded* because of who I'm willing to *include*, than to be *included* on account of who I *exclude*." That's a great synopsis of the way Jesus operates. He was *excluded* by the religious people because he *in-cluded everyone else*.

The more I read the Gospels, the more I've come to see that the people Jesus *judges*...the people he criticizes...they are the people who, *themselves*, act as judges of other people. Jesus consistently calls out the religious and the powerful who speak and act in ways that say to others, "*You're not good enough, you're not deserving. You are unclean...unacceptable...unlovable."*

The Good News is that *our Savior*, Jesus Christ, completely **rejects** these kinds of ideas and these kinds of bullies—over and over again. It is one of the most crystal-clear patterns throughout all four Gospels.

And this lesson cuts really close to home, yall.

William Alexander Guerry was a bishop of *this diocese* in the early 20th century. He was widely known for actively and fully welcoming African Americans into the life of this diocese until this very week...in 1928...when he was assassinated...by *a priest* who had served in this diocese. That's right, a priest walked into Bishop Guerry's office in downtown Charleston, and shot him.

Now, which of these two men resembles Jesus—you know, a profound *lack of judgment* and a loving spirit of welcome to everyone? And which one resembles the Pharisees—*filled to the brim with judgment* and a profound lack of *concern* for others?

At the end of today's Gospel lesson, Jesus shows up once again with a healing touch. And the judges are *still* judging. See, they've 'written off' the little girl *just like* they had written off the people Jesus welcomed to dinner.

Now, notice that Jesus does *not* perform a miracle here. According to what Jesus says, the girl is *not dead*, but sleeping. When he takes her by the hand, she gets up. And Jesus reveals that the judges were once again *wrong*...for writing her off.

You have some homework this week! Take some time this week and reflect on occasions when you've experienced *true welcome*. Think of when someone took *you* by the hand—in order to *show you* that you are lovable...and that you are *loved*. They showed you what a profound *lack of judgment* looks like!

Then, I want you to pray about whose hand *you might be willing to take*, in order to welcome or heal or bless...*like Jesus*.

It is not always easy, but you can do it! If *Matthew, the tax collector*, could do it, then *you can do it!*

Just listen for Jesus, because he is always calling sinners...*like us*, saying, "Come on, follow me."

Amen.