

*Based on Matthew 9:9-12. Jesus and Matthew Party with the Misfits.*

In the recovery community, I have learned, one of many slogans that keep the addict from relapse is this: *we are not bad people trying to be good; we are sick people trying to get well.*

The sickness is not the fault of the addict, they say. Addiction is a disease, like cancer or COVID, like strep throat or sciatica. Recovery is the medicine to mitigate the disease, just like any other kind of medicine one might take in order to get and stay well.

In our Lesson today, we have a whole lot of sick people trying to get well at the table with Jesus. Tax collectors, we are told - *boo!* - and sinners to boot - *stay away from them if you have any hope of being cool!* In modern day parlance this would be the social pariahs - think *the latest political scoundrel*, as our poet suggests - and the social outcasts - think just about anyone not named Taylor Swift.

These are the folks who, maybe by choice, maybe by circumstance, just do not fit in any one place, let alone the church, let alone the church that thinks it has it all together, everyone wants to be like us, and if those other folks for some reason *do not* want to be like us, shame on *them*, no wonder they are all rejects, who does this Jesus guy think he is, hanging out with them, anyway?

At SPC, we get it. Just go down the pew or the choir loft or the Facebook feed, one person to the next. Just about everybody at SPC has one story or another about not quite fitting in and landing here because someone somewhere in their hour of despair suggested SPC just might be their *church of last resort*.

From the yoga instructor mystic who also hangs out with conservative Christian home schoolers, to the unchurched jazz musician/eastern philosopher who is learning this guy Jesus might have a thing or two to say about social justice, to the Reiki Master/Presbyterian preacher who really just wants to live a life of quiet contemplation but keeps finding herself compelled into ministries of social action, and everything in-between, most of us here at SPC have a foot in multiple worlds of meaning making, hope cultivating, and belonging inspiring.

We have learned, the hard way for many of us, that no one world seems to have all the answers. But because SPC truly does try to *welcome all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging*, we sure do enjoy sharing the journey through the questions! In fact, we pride ourselves on it. If meaning, hope, and belonging are part of your longing, come on in, we say, we have that longing, too.

On that note, though, it turns out we might still have something to learn from our Lesson from Matthew. It is not clear in the Greek where the exact *location* of this party of meaning making unfolds. If, as a cursory reading of the story might suggest, Matthew joins Jesus *at the house of Jesus* and all the rejects come running to join them *there*, that really does place *Jesus* in the position of host with the rest of us as guests at *his* table. This is, of course, how we present the Sacrament in the church setting - even at SPC - with an angel choir singing - or

Sam serenading - and the heavens unfolding, which will absolutely happen right here at this table in just a few moments!

On the other hand, though, if, as many commentators suggest, Jesus is joining Matthew *at the house of Matthew*, where all the rejects *have already been* congregating for quite some time now, thank you very much, that places *Matthew the pariah* in the position of host, with the rest of us - including Jesus - as guests at *his* table.

Talk about turning the tables!

I think the Greek may be ambiguous for a reason. Yes, we in the church emphatically must present the table of Jesus right here in this sanctuary as the place to come for meaning, hope, and belonging. And at the same time, we in the church must also emphatically risk *putting ourselves out there* among those other misfits beyond these walls who might be finding meaning, hope, and belonging at tables we never even imagined existed.

Take the Eastern Panhandle Youth Alliance, for example, where LGBTQIA+ young people who most certainly feel like they do not belong anywhere else *are welcoming US* into *their* longing for meaning, hope, and belonging. Take the Community Meal in Charles Town gathering tonight, or The Community Cup in Martinsburg gathering on Fridays. Can you imagine addicts and folks who live without permanent shelter welcoming the good church folk from SPC with open arms? They would! Talk about misfits and rejects and pariahs seeking - and finding - meaning, hope, and belonging. Talk about joining Jesus at the table of Matthew and finding a whole new way of celebrating sacrament.

This is the reason we Acclaim, at the end of every worship service, that we join *with believers in EVERY time and EVERY place* to rejoice *that nothing can separate us from the love of God*. Whether it is this time and this place on Sunday morning at SPC or Friday night at The Community Cup or Monday Evening with the Eastern Panhandle Youth Alliance, or Thursday nights at The Bar, the welcome table holds us, misfits every one, in our longing.

And the table continues ...

What if we figured out how to take the acclamation to the Sunday morning soccer game where our own Gino Santacroce is gathering right now with his family to learn how to love God with his body, as well as with his mind? We could commission a couple of people from the service to join them in the name of SPC so they do not have to choose one over the other. Or - God forbid! - what if we figured out how to take the acclamation to the teenagers' TikTok feed? Might *they* have a thing or two to teach us in our longing from their time and their place?

The good news for us, no matter the time or the place, is that there is also reason we at SPC proclaim at the beginning of each worship service that our deepest, truest, most lasting belonging *is in God*, in life and in death, no matter what. No matter where we are, no matter what we do or do not believe, no matter how sick we are or

how well, this kind of belonging, this kind of meaning, this kind of hope, is ours for the journey, no matter what!