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Holy Trinity, West Columbia, SC
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Sinners Anonymous

Matthew 9:9-13

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Matthew 9:9–13 (NKJ)

9 As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he arose and followed Him.

10 Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a saying that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. What is meant by this is that we are giving ourselves permission to go to Las Vegas, sin however we like, and then leave it behind to return home. Maybe we indulge our greediness, our abuse of alcohol or drugs, or our desire for sex. Whatever the sin and guilt, we then excuse our selves by saying “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” This way, a supposed good person can be whatever they like in Vegas, and go back to being a good person when they return home. The question is, do you really leave it behind? Do the sins committed there really stay in Vegas?

There is another saying for us today; that is: “what happens in church stays with Christ.” And there's a significant difference between these two sayings. On the one hand, Vegas becomes a place for supposedly good people to hide their sin and go back to being good people; whereas church is a place for those who know their sinners to become saints. Sinners come to church to truly leave their sins behind, and with God's forgiveness, leave as holy people.

This is much different than Vegas—whatever your “Vegas” might be. You see, with Vegas, you never really leave those sins behind. You may not speak of them; you may try to forget them—yet, they do not just get left behind. They become part of you. They have touched your soul; they change your conscience; they fester in your flesh.

This is why we have come to church today. It is for this very reason—that we need a place to get rid of those sins and make that soul right again. This is a different sort of place for sinners—where an anonymous group of people can come together for the very purpose of having God expose who they really are and what they’ve done. To borrow a term I learned from another pastor—it’s a “sinners anonymous.” Or in the words of Martin Luther, “Church is not a monastery for saints, but a hospital for sinners.” It is a place for those who know they have a problem, who know they need help. A sinners anonymous.

So we hear the Pharisees question, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answers, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners; that is his business; that is his work. He eats with men like Matthew—a tax collector. Tax collectors were not liked by the people, not only because they collected their taxes, and not only because they were often greedy and corrupt, but also because these were Jewish men—that is to say, they were more loyal to the oppressive Roman empire, than they were to their own countrymen. Because of this they were lumped together with the Romans. According to the Law, they were considered “unclean.” Their dealings with a foreign government and the false religion it represented rendered tax collectors unclean and unable to participate in Temple worship. The Pharisees grouped them together with those they considered “sinners.”

Jesus eats with “sinners.” Now when we use this word, we might think of sinners in general; no one is perfect—we are all sinners, yes. But when the Pharisees use this term, they mean something more specific. They are thinking of a specific class of people. A “sinner” in their mind was someone who was outside of the covenant of promise; outside of God’s salvation for Israel. It is similar to how we might speak of unbelievers or atheists. Because of their lifestyle or because of some curse that God had laid upon them, the Pharisees considered this people unclean. They would not eat with this sort unless they completed the prescribed purification rituals and received approval by a priest. In their eyes, this class of people were “outsiders”—they were the drunks and the downtrodden, the poor and the prostitutes, the irreligious and the immigrant.

Yet Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus eats with Matthew. Matthew is just that sort of person. A tax collector—burdened by a past of greed, materialism, political corruption, and loyalty only to self. There he is, working at the tax stand, right up to the moment Jesus comes into his life. And with just a word, it all changes. “Follow me,” Jesus says. And Matthew drops what he’s doing, leaves behind his job, his income, his property—leaves behind everything that he was and did—and follows Jesus. He follows Jesus because he knows, Jesus forgives tax collectors and sinners.

You see, Matthew knew he had a problem. He knew he needed help. He knew he was sick, hurt, injured, and needed a Physician's care. "Follow Me" means believe in Me; trust in Me; believe that I am your only source of healing. It's like being rescued from the midst of a mob. Imagine being caught up in a Charlottesville riot. Two groups of people on either side are coming at you. On the one hand, you've got those characterized as left wing liberals coming at you with clubs in the name of equality and those on the other side characterized as the alt right in the name of history coming at you with their own weapons and words. And there you are caught in the middle of a riot. You don't care to be on this side or that side—yet, your sins have brought you there to be involved. Your own hatred, discrimination, and false witness got you there and now you are caught with no way out. You are abused, hurt, injured, and unable to get out. Then, out of the chaos comes a voice and out of the crowd reaches a hand. "Follow me," He says.

Beat up, bruised, abused, and here He comes with a way out, a way to safety, a way free. Would you be worried at all about what you're taking with you? Would you think twice about grabbing his hand? Would you ask him to wait so you can get a few things done before you go? Would you ask if you can bring a few of those angry people along? Here comes Christ, with hand outstretched, with voice out spoken, to show you to the hospital; to a place of healing—because, as Luther put it, "Church is not a monastery for saints, but a hospital for sinners."

Christ came to rescue us from that unruly mob. From the sin and evil that abuses us. And he does so by putting himself right into the middle of it. When we are set free, it is because he has taken our place. He stands between the Pharisees and the crowds and in the midst of the anger. They come at him with swords and clubs and all sorts of false witness. But he does not fight; he does not shout; he simply submits. He lays himself down before the ridicule, the suffering, and the nails of the cross. And by His substitution, He wins for you forgiveness. When Jesus says, "Follow Me," He means, your sins are forgiven, help and healing is found with me, don't look back, don't take those sins with you, follow Me.

This is our "sinners anonymous." Church is a place for tax collectors and sinners to be exposed for who they've been and what they've done. And the first step is admitting we have a problem. The first step is recognizing the need for forgiveness and help. Whatever the addiction; whatever indulgence that took place in Vegas; whatever the class of persons you belong to—there is no hiding it here.

We come anonymously. There are no names, judgments, or prejudice that singled you out to say you need to go to church today. Rather, the invitation is nameless. The only exclusion is those who suppose they are already healthy, who ignore the problem, who think they are righteous on their own. No, this invitation is not for those who are well. It is for only those who know they need Christ. Now we have arrived. And once here, there's no more anonymity. We are no longer nameless. Once we are within this group of Christians to stand in the presence of God, and we no longer keep our Vegas story secret. God knows it all. And still he comes to meet with you. Still he comes to eat with you. Still he comes to welcome you. He gives you a name. He calls you by name. He baptizes you into His name.

Church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners. It is a place where we receive the treatment needed. Not the cure, mind you. This is not cure for your sinful flesh. Just because you leave Vegas behind, does not mean the struggle is over and the wounds are cured. There is in fact no cure that will rid you of your sinful flesh this side of heaven. Rather, what you receive here is treatment. A constant treatment. And daily treatment is needed if you are to remain healthy. Daily repentance and forgiveness is your prescription; frequent confession and absolution with pastor or friend; regular attendance at church to receive the Lord's Supper—in other words, "Follow Him" means wherever he is, that is where you need to be.

Yes, this is your sinners anonymous. Yet, what happens here, does not totally have to stay here. There is something you can talk about outside of these services. This is a story you can tell, just like Matthew has told us his story. This is an invitation that you can share. There is no exclusion, no partiality, no judgment, it is for all. Say to someone, you know, I have that same problem—let me tell you about where I go for help. Come to think of it, we are meeting this Sunday. Why don't you come along with me? Amen.