

“Everyone Matters”  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

One of my favorite fictitious characters from Arabic literature is Juha. His behavior and words are sometimes unusual and even eccentric. One story is told about Juha traveling on his donkey through several small villages. Every village had a different opinion on how Juha should treat his donkey. During the course of his journey Juha tried to please the people, but every time he tried something, he was criticized. One village thought that it was too cruel for him to ride on the back of his donkey for a long time, so Juha decided to walk side by side with his donkey. Another village thought he was stupid to walk while he had a donkey, so he decided to ride his donkey. Still another village told him that the poor animal had too much to carry and needed a rest, so Juha decided to carry the donkey on his back. After going through several villages without being able to find just the right way to treat his donkey, Juha decided to sell his donkey and go home.

This story teaches us that outside of the major boundaries about killing, stealing and violence, our social boundaries are artificial and are always changing. Our standards for what is right and what is wrong keep changing. If you live in one country, you might think something is OK while people of another country might think it is not. 100 years ago, certain things were considered appropriate but now they are not. In 100 years from now, people will judge us because their social standards will be different. When this church was established 200 years ago, a lot of things were different. So the key to being faithful is not getting stuck on our human standards, but being inclusive and open to have our circle of love be ever widening.

This is not just my personal opinion. It is the call of Christ to us. Our Bible reading for today from the Gospel of Matthew has in it three encounters which Jesus had with those who were judged by society and marginalized. Tax collection, hemorrhage/menstruation, and death are things that are acceptable in our society today. We don't think that the people who touch a dead body are unclean. There is no shame about working for the IRS. But these things were judged by society as bad during that time. Tax collectors (for the Roman government) were considered traitors and, because of the nature of Roman taxation, were believed to be corrupt and predatory. To associate with tax collectors who were considered sinners, and especially to eat with them, would compromise one's purity. There was probably no person more despised by Jewish peasants than the tax-collector. This was because they were the representatives of the political and economic elite of both Israel and of Rome. The tax collectors lived among the people in each village and, in fact, grew up as part of the people. But they had chosen to betray the people by being the ones who collected the money that supported the Roman occupation, the land-owners and the clergy aristocracy. As a reward for their unsavory work, the tax-collectors were permitted to keep a significant percentage of the taxes for themselves; this, in turn, made tax-collectors among the wealthiest people in any village – but also the most despised. The people recognized that the “untouchables” or expendables of Israelite society (the widows, orphans, beggars, lepers, destitute) had all fallen into the expendable class by circumstance, whereas the tax-collector chose his ostracism out of his lust for money and power.

The other two stories also show how Jesus crossed the boundaries of society to help those who were considered unclean. A woman having her period was perceived to be unclean, and since that woman had not stopped hemorrhaging for twelve years, she was constantly unclean. This meant that she would be ostracized by society and isolated from any social events for the fear of making others unclean. This woman said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well” (v. 21). The word “cloak” *Kraspedou* can mean simply a hem or border, but it can also refer to a tassel or *tallith* worn by Jewish men to remind them of God's commandments (Num. 15:37-39; Deut. 22:12) — and to identify them as observant Jews. Jesus was possibly wearing the *tallith* out of respect for the law. “Oral tradition forbade a woman from touching the *tallith* of someone who was not a member of her family.” Being in a house of death was to make oneself unclean, and to touch the dead child compounded the uncleanness. What was Jesus doing? Did he not know that “bad company corrupts?” What about, “One bad apple spoils the barrel!?” Or “Bad company is the devil's net!” Or “You can't run with dogs without getting fleas!” These old proverbs reflect the truth that the company we keep makes a difference in our lives. But this is the company that Jesus kept.

Jesus was plowing right upstream against a set of complex Jewish law and customs. The essence of faith was not a matter of what you believed, but of what you did. It was about how you observed the laws and practices. Jesus' attitude and actions seemed cavalier and insulting. We cannot assume that the Pharisees were a bunch of beady-eyed bigots. As in our own churches today, there were some of those. But most of

them were sincere people struggling to live the way they thought God wanted them to live. What Jesus did felt like a karate chop to the solar plexus.

The Pharisees might have responded very differently to Jesus' dinner with tax collectors. They too championed hospitality. But the rabbis had in mind hospitality to the pious poor, and taught, "Keep far from an evil neighbor and do not associate with the wicked." The Pharisees have a point about evildoers. They are upholding wisdom that has been gained painfully through the centuries. They do not want evil companions, and they do not honor evil people with their presence. They would not have criticized Jesus merely because he cared for the outcast, the poor, and the sinner. 'They too welcomed the *repentant* sinner.' What is new is that Jesus *sought out* and embraced the sinner. Jesus even selected one of them to be his disciple.

The problem with the judgment of the Pharisees and with our own judgments is that the standards we use to judge people are human standards that change with time and space. Who is to say that our standards for judging people today are timeless and universal? What we see as wrong today may become acceptable 20 years from now. So, the problem lies with our judging others and marginalizing them.

The challenge for us is to learn to have an open heart and an open mind. This is not about being liberal or conservative. This is about learning to love like Christ did. In sixteenth-century Paris, a beggar was desperately ill. He was taken to the operating table of a group of doctors. In Latin, which they were sure he would not understand, the doctors said, "Faciamus experimentum in anima vile" (Let us experiment on this vile fellow). The beggar, who was actually an impoverished student, later to become a renowned poet, Marc Antoine Muret, replied from the slab on which they had laid him, "Animam vilem appellas pro qua Christus non dedigantus mori est?" (Will you call vile one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?)

Do you ever find yourself in the position in those doctors? Do you ever judge people based on their appearance, race, gender, political views, marital status, practices, or anything else? What basis/standards does our society use to judge people? Do you think that there are universal ethics in the world that are just right for all of humanity? Who would Jesus include at today's table? Jesus accepted those who were despised by society, the exploiter (tax collector), the woman, and the dead. They were all unclean people who jeopardized his reputation. Yet, they were all restored to community through the power of Christ's inclusive love. So, if we are serious about sharing the love of God with others, it is essential for us to seek out, include and love those who are marginalized in our world today even if our reputation is on the line.

People with disabilities are among the marginalized in our world today. We have come a long way, yet there is still a lot for us to learn about how to be inclusive and open to them. I know that our church has recently formed a committee to look into making our building more accessible to all people. My prayer and invitation to all of us is to always have our doors and hearts open to all those who might be considered unclean or unacceptable in our society. I also pray that we will always seek justice and healing for the oppressed in our world. The wisdom of the story of Juha is a good measure for us whenever we see a marginalized group in our midst. It helps us remember to be humble about our social and ethical standards because they are not one and the same as God's standards.

Mr. Bridgman was a rich farmer who lost two of his daughters in the scarlet fever epidemic in 1831. His third daughter Laura was only two at the time. She didn't die but her fever was so high for such a long time that she lost her ability to see, hear and speak. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, the director of the famous Perkins Institute for the Blind, came to visit the family a few years later and to ask them if they would allow his institute to work with Laura to help her learn to communicate. The father responded by saying, "Don't be silly. Look at the child. She cannot be taught. She cannot understand anything. She follows her mother around the house all day, holding an old boot! She does not even understand that is not a fit plaything." Dr. Howe said, "I know it sounds impossible. There have been many cases where people have tried to reach children like this. I admit to you that all of them have failed. But, I have communicated with many of these teachers. I believe that I can take the best of their ideas and add some of my own. Perhaps the Lord will show me a way to succeed where others have failed." The father kept insisting that this was not going to work considering the condition of the child. Then the mother shared her struggle. "I did not only lose two daughters in the scarlet fever epidemic. I lost three. A child who cannot hear or see or speak lives a life that is so much like a death." So finally the father agreed to give it a try. So, when Dr. Howe took Laura to the Perkins Institute for the Blind, they had to work with her and experiment with different methods. There was no Braille or sign language as yet, so they put raised letters on all the objects in Laura's new environment. Every fork and piece of furniture was labeled. Before long Laura could match the labels to the objects although she seemed to have little understanding of

what it meant. One day, after a few weeks, she made the connection. Dr. Howe watched the look of wonder and delight that crossed her face. He ran to her and began to pat her head. "Yes, Laura, yes, they are words and they mean something," he said out loud. Then he realized that he was patting her head too hard in his enthusiasm. He began to gently stroke her hair, and then he began to cry. He then wrote, "She perceived that there was a way by which she could make herself up a sign of anything that was in her mind, and show it to another mind; and at once her face lighted up with a human expression. It was no longer a dog or parrot. It was an immortal spirit, eagerly seizing upon a new link of union with other spirits!"

Laura learned to write on grooved paper. She learned to write poetry and even wrote an autobiography. She learned life skills also: Cleaning, sewing and knitting. People from all over the world came to see her and learn about how to help other students with disabilities. Even after her death at the age of sixty, Laura continued to influence the education of children with special needs. A doctor conducted an anatomical study of her brain that was cited in textbooks for decades. One of the students who would learn much from Laura's case was Ann Sullivan who would go on to work with an ever more famous student: Helen Keller.

All are invited, loved and accepted because everyone matters to God! Amen.