

Jesus' Beloveds

They were precious

In the Gospel lesson today, the reader encounters a Jesus who senses presence and sees God's creation in its fullness. The passage from Matthew focuses on the unlikely being held as precious by the King of Kings.

The Gospel of Matthew is, at its core, about community. It is Good News written for a largely Jewish community who knew the meaning of ostracization. They understood what it was like to live under oppressive rule and to navigate a society that demanded loyalty to Rome while remaining faithful to God. Many lived under the constant pressure of maintaining a careful balance—faithfulness to Torah while avoiding punishment from imperial powers. Failure could mean imprisonment or death.

The way the Jewish people preserved their identity was by holding fast to the Torah, the first five books of Scripture. They remembered and embodied the words of Moses. It can be easy in hindsight to view strict adherence to these laws as rigid, but in truth, they preserved a fragile identity and sustained a people. They set apart those who belonged to God from those who did not.

Of course, strict adherence had its limits. At times it could isolate people rather than bind them together. Leaders became so focused on rule-keeping that they risked forgetting the heart of the commandments. Jesus names those commandments clearly: love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two, he says, hang all the law and the prophets. When those commands are forgotten, the law loses its center.

Yes, Jesus sits at the table with tax collectors and sinners—those marked as outsiders and corrupt. He also engages the religious leaders who question him. When they ask, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answers directly: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”¹

Matthew is among those considered sick by society. He is scorned because of his profession, labeled a traitor and a thief. Jesus looks at him, senses his worth, and calls him into a new life—not in spite of who he is, but in the midst of it. Jesus' actions reveal something essential: he is a faithful Jewish man who fully participates in the traditions of his people. The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes this. Even small details—like the tassels on his garment, the tzitzit prescribed in Numbers and Deuteronomy²—signal that Jesus is an insider, faithful to Torah observance.

This matters. It gives Jesus both authority and authenticity.

¹ Matthew 9:12

² Numbers 15:38-41, Deuteronomy 22:12.

And yet the story turns. The one fully rooted in tradition is also the one radically open. Jesus holds together fidelity and boundary-breaking love. He is both comfort and disruption, both affirmation and challenge.

The Pharisees and the tax collectors are precious.

She was Precious

The story of course, continues, as Jesus moves forward. A synagogue leader comes to Jesus with urgency: his daughter has died. It might seem too late, but he has faith that Jesus can still act.

He sees Jesus as a rabbi shaped by Torah, one who understands life and death as part of the covenant with Israel. Jesus responds to his faith and goes with him.

In this biblical time, women were often given little social standing. Girls were particularly vulnerable as much of this social status was given through motherhood. Some girls were often abandoned at birth.³ Therefore, Jesus is doing something radical by deeply valuing this girl. She is sick, yet she is seen and valued despite a lack of social status.

Jesus declares that the girl is not dead but sleeping. Jesus takes her by the hand and brings her into the crowd that waited outside her house. In a powerful act, Jesus restores her to health and to community.

The journey to her house was interrupted by another story, perhaps the most scandalous person in the story.

It was a woman.

There was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. In this condition, she would not have had the opportunity to be married and have children.⁴ Under the laws of ritual purity, this type of bleeding is known as *niddah*.⁵ This woman was likely isolated and afraid of being noticed. As was appropriate to custom, she did not seek an audience with Jesus, because he was a man. What she did in approaching him was outside of Jewish custom: she went into the crowd. The unnamed woman would have been encouraged to stay outside the crowd so as not to make anyone ritually impure.

This woman, this Jewish woman, had deep faith. She did what she could in approaching Jesus and touched the tassel. She hoped she could be healed without being noticed.

Jesus senses her. Power has gone out from him, and he turns to see her—and I suspect that Jesus sensed her faith.

³ Both Hare, D.R.A. (1993). *Matthew: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

⁴ Kaolyo, J. 2010. "Matthew." *African Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing.

⁵ *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction*. (1996). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Also, see Leviticus 15:19-30, 18:19, 20:18.

Jesus uses the word daughter when speaking to her. He is not harsh. He is welcoming. This is radical, controversial, and completely appropriate.

In this passage, Jesus has seen and loved a large group of people: the Pharisees, a tax collector, a synagogue leader, an unnamed woman, and a young girl.

Imagine what Jesus sees, hears, and says to you.

You are Precious

Some of you know who I am, but this church has grown. As it says in your bulletins, I am The Rev. Beth Anne Nelson, and I served as your curate for two years. Three years ago, I gave my last sermon at St. Dunstan's as your curate and I preached on this exact text. This parish helped form me into the priest I have become through your generous spirit and huge hearts. You all gave me a beautiful send off and helped me land softly at my next calling as the Missioner for The Episcopal Church at Rice.

My calling as a missionary began in the Gospel of Matthew. This is a fitting Gospel for those students who followed the rules of the path to academic success. If they applied early they had a 13% acceptance rate. If they applied late, they had a 4-8% acceptance rate. They were not going out and having fun with friends, but they were studying to get good grades, do impressive extracurriculars, volunteer, and stay on a path.

When I was called to Rice, it surprised me because I do not consider myself among the intellectual elite. A colleague of mine told me they did not need that - they had plenty of it. They needed someone to help them interpret God's law as love.

To take God's words in Holy Scripture and help them see they too are seen, heard, and known by Jesus Christ. That is the call at Rice and all of you prepared me well for it.

I think for St. Dunstan's the Gospel of Matthew is fitting as well. This Gospel is for those who know the way God loves them. I have always admired the way that St. Dunstan's is a church steeped in the Bible. Fr. Roldan and I used to go out for Bible studies with parishioners. You know how to create a community together.

It is hard to know where, as a priest who has not walked with you in three years, to say that you might improve. Alas, I will try. St. Dunstan's you have grown both spiritually and in numbers. You have done this by including more people at services throughout Sunday. I hope that this is how you continue.

Find those who have been marginalized because society deems them as outsiders: maybe because of the way they look, vote, are unhoused, educated, uneducated, or disabled.

Jesus calls us into the world to care for others that might otherwise get on our nerves. It might not be easy. So remember: Jesus called a tax collector. A sinner. He embraced a girl who was traditionally rejected. He challenged a Pharisee. He embraced an excluded woman as daughter.

You can do this too. Because Jesus sees, hears, and senses you as a beloved Child of God. Amen.

Additional Works Consulted

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