

Yesterday I was delighted to bless a newborn baby, Daniel Dennison, and his parents Dallas and Leah. They're all doing great; hopefully we'll see them in church soon. I was late getting there, because I didn't even know TMH had a women's pavilion, let alone where it was. Leah had to send me her location on her cell phone. It was still a wonderful visit, but I remarked that most of the time, when I visit the hospital, it's because something terrible has happened, not something wonderful. Which is not a complaint.

One of the greatest joys of ordained ministry is the profound privilege of being there for people when they need you the most. Visiting people who are injured, sick, and/or dying is a privilege too, even though those visits are sometimes difficult. It's a privilege not just because you can sometimes make them feel better, and you feel gratified and appreciated, but also because it's easiest to see the majestic grace of God in moments when people realize just how much they need God.

The toughest pastoral interactions, though, are with people who are just the opposite, who might pay lip service to God and to Christian values, but who really think they are doing everything right, they certainly don't need help, and everyone else is sick, foolish, or worse. So it's not so surprising that Jesus would seek out and invite people who knew they were spiritually sick to dine with him than people like the Pharisees, who judged him for it rather than reaching out to help anyone.

Immediately before this passage, Jesus healed a man who was physically paralyzed in order to show both his divinity and the loving nature of God. Now he takes on the spiritually paralyzed. And who better than a tax collector to make the point? The name "Matthew" is Hebrew for "gift of the Lord." I would imagine that other Jews saw that as a bitter irony, since tax collectors were utterly despised, and for good reason. Tax collectors, of course, were greedy, abusive collaborators with the Roman occupiers, but there was also a deeper spiritual problem. Jews of the time saw tax collectors as part of a regime whose head, the emperor, claimed to be a god, supporting that regime and its blasphemy by diverting money that was supposed to support the center of worship of the one true God, the Temple in Jerusalem. So tax collectors were seen not just as political and material traitors, but as spiritual traitors, too.

Who better for Jesus to call as a follower? Just as the most dramatic healings showed his power most clearly, reaching out to someone like Matthew showed Jesus's grace and mercy most clearly — not to mention stopping tax collection in that area for a while. Well, clearly to us, anyway. The Pharisees questioned what Jesus was doing. And they kind of had a point. Righteous people really weren't supposed to fraternize with people like Matthew. Not only because showing them kindness might encourage them, or encourage others to join them, but also because, to consider Jesus's own metaphor, physicians are at risk of catching diseases from their patients.

The Pharisees suffered from a sickness of their own, that of self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness, but this time, Jesus does not denounce them. I'm sure Jesus

understood where they were coming from. Their concerns about the many threats posed by tax collectors and other collaborators were valid, and they didn't understand Jesus well enough to know that he was not at risk, and was not a threat, but is the inexhaustible source of all healing. They certainly couldn't foresee Christianity becoming the state religion of the empire!

Rather than getting into an argument or embarrassing them, Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea to the Pharisees and gets on with his day. However, his day continued giving examples of the concept from the quote, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus went on from showing mercy to Matthew and his fellow tax collectors and sinners, and showed mercy to other people, two women who would have been considered unclean, though not sinful. The woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages was proactive, but of course the dead girl could not exercise any agency, and her father may have approached Jesus more out of desperation than faith.

These examples show just how comprehensive God's grace is. God loves the faithful and the sinner, the confident and the desperate, and even people like Matthew, who made no effort at all. God even loved the Pharisees, showing them grace by engaging with them respectfully and pointing them toward a better understanding. We also see in these encounters that what is necessary is not righteousness, but humility and open-mindedness.

None of us has enough righteousness to place ourselves on equal terms with God, and no sacrifice could change that. We might not be in as bad shape as the people Jesus had dinner with, or the Pharisees, but in a way, it doesn't matter. We are all sinners, we all have fallen short of the goodness God intended for us, and we all need the grace that God is delighted freely to offer us, but never forces on us. Everyone in today's Gospel could have stayed where they were, but instead they were sufficiently available to Jesus, and any encounter with Jesus is life-changing. He overcomes stigma, sickness, and even death itself, but perhaps his greatest feat of healing is healing Matthew of his own self-interest, his comfort with the status quo and his own place therein.

If anything, Jesus is more available to us now than during his public ministry. St. Paul pointed out that the death and resurrection of Jesus make it possible for anyone to have a special relationship with God like Abraham and Sarah had. Such a relationship might entail some form of sacrifice, but that is only ever a faithful response to God's love, not a way of earning God's love. God called Abraham to be willing to sacrifice Isaac, not because God actually wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but because God wanted Abraham to sacrifice any illusion of self-interest or control. The greater sacrifice might have been at the beginning, when Abraham sacrificed his familiar life in order to follow God's call to a new one, which turned out to be a great blessing to him, his household, and many, many others.

And yet, despite such abundant grace, many refuse to accept God's invitation,

don't want to connect with God. A few people might be resentful if God does not give them what they want, when they want it. But God is like that for very good reasons, some of which other people have problems with.

Hosea points out that God *is* faithful to us, far more faithful than we are to God, but God lets us experience the consequences of our choices and the choices of others. God does not work on our schedule, does not give us what we want when we want it, because while God does love us, God does not work for us. If we could control God, then God would not be sovereign, and if God were not sovereign, God could not save us, and would not be worthy of worship.

Some people feel threatened by the notion of God's sovereignty and react poorly to anything that reminds them of these facts. Some are so threatened by grace that they evidently prefer a perverse distortion of God, that projects all of humanity's violence, cruelty, pettiness, and narrow-mindedness onto God, rather than the truth. I suppose twisting God into a monster makes it easier for some people to feel better about themselves, or helps them control others. But the Church would do humanity a grave disservice if it only ever told them what they want to hear.

So Matthew's name didn't turn out to be so ironic after all. Because of his work, and the work of the other apostles and evangelists, the Church is able continually to tell the truth about God's profound love for humanity, expressed most perfectly in Jesus, the ultimate gift. When we internalize that truth, we are empowered to share the grace and mercy of God with those who need it most, no matter how difficult the situation, or the individual, might be. All we have to sacrifice are our closed-mindedness, our self-righteousness, our complacency, and our desire to sin — only things that we should want to be rid of anyway. Then, embracing the grace of our baptism, we remember that we are already dead to sin, we are the living sacrifice, we are the blessed newborns in Christ, bringing joy to many.