

As Jesus was walking along, he saw Matthew sitting at a tax booth. It sounds as if this was an unplanned interruption to whatever plans Jesus had for the day. Without any previous relationship that we know of, he simply says two words to Matthew, “follow me.” He was obviously on his way to some destination, but he stopped and called this man to join him.

Jesus takes Matthew to dinner at someone’s house where a bunch of tax collectors and other outcasts then come to join him. The religious leaders, the Pharisees, seem quite concerned about this gathering for some reason and asked his disciples why he would do such a thing. Why would this bother them? Why would they care who this Jesus ate dinner with? This was just not the way things were done.

Jesus overheard them and responded that he had come to call sinners, not the righteous. That must have either confused or outraged them as they saw themselves as the most righteous people around and deserved to be treated as such. His complete focus seemed to be on people they would walk on by on their way to the temple. The idea that Jesus would choose these tax collectors and other losers over them made no sense and greatly offended them.

Notice the word used next. “*Suddenly*” a leader of the synagogue rushed in and breathlessly asked Jesus to come and bring his daughter who had just died back to life. If this were in a movie it would be a very dramatic scene. No doubt those Pharisees were still standing there watching this and were even more confused. Without hesitation Jesus responds to yet another interruption, got up from the table, and with his disciples tagging along, headed out for the man’s house.

And then again “*suddenly*,” there was another dramatic interruption as a woman he did not know touched his cloak believing that she would be healed. Jesus noticed her and said that her faith had made her well, and “*instantly*” she was made well. I have always suspected that those Pharisees were still lurking in the background gathering evidence that this man was becoming a serious problem to the status quo, and oh, how they loved the status quo.

So then, the story goes, Jesus arrives at the house where the little girl had just died. As he and his disciples approached, they saw a bunch of apparent mourners playing flutes and a crowd of other people hanging around making a commotion. He told them to go away as the girl was not dead, but just sleeping, and it came as no surprise that they laughed at him. Who was this man? Who did he think he was? Jesus ignored yet one more potential interruption and went into the house, took the little girl by the hand and she got up. Needless to say, the word of this action spread quickly around the region. I imagine the Pharisees were still hanging around, maybe in the back of the crowd. What in the world were they thinking about this development? Nothing they had seen about this Jesus was expected, and they were not big on surprises either. Although nothing he had done directly involved them, they were bothered. It looked like he paid his full attention to whomever was in front of him, or behind him in the case of the woman touching his robe.

I think there is a good chance that Jesus may have been one of those people who drives us nuts if we had an appointment with him because the chances are quite good that he would be late. The late Bishop Herb Thompson was my Bishop in Southern Ohio and a dear friend before I was elected Bishop. He was *never* on time for an appointment whether at his office or somewhere else. The reason it was so hard to get upset was that when you were the one he

was with, it seemed as if you were the only person in the world. He lost track of time because his total attention was on you. I suspect Jesus was guilty of the same thing. In the story today, it sounds like he was interrupted a lot, but he saw the interruptions as his most important ministry.

I believe that when Jesus called Matthew and others to follow him, he meant for them to follow his example. He intended for them to do what he did, to put other people first. He told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, and that was totally and unconditionally. In other words, his disciples are called to be so different that other people notice and wonder why just as the Pharisees did. Of course, that is the heart of the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

I suppose that we might say that was easier for Jesus since that was his nature, who he truly was as the Son of God. Well, guess who has been created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore, of Jesus? We have. It follows that if we are to live the lives God calls us to live, then we also are called to be the ones late for appointments because we have stopped to deal with the interruption of someone else's need, problem, or pain.

There really cannot be a more vital goal in life than to live as we were intended to live by the One who dreamed us up in the first place. And that same Creator has instilled in us the ability to know when we are doing that, our conscience. It is that little annoying voice that tells us when we are behaving in a way that does not reflect who we are. And there is also that wonderful inner feeling of goodness and peace when we have done something that reflects our true nature as children of the God of love. We will also notice that this sense of rightness will invariably come from something we have done for another person. As followers of Jesus our goal each day is to look for ways to love and serve a neighbor or two.

Will we get it right? Absolutely not. And we take care of that little problem every Sunday as we say, "we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart, nor our neighbor as ourselves. Have mercy upon us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways." And God says, "because of my Son, of course you are forgiven, and it is as if your failure this past week never happened. The slate is clean, the score is zero, and you are perfect in my eyes."

We leave this place free to truly live the first day of our lives, as we hear the charge to "go in peace to love and serve the Lord." Will we get it totally right next week? Absolutely not, but maybe just a little better than last week.

I love animals and I think we can learn a lot from them. I was sitting on our back porch this week when some squirrels caught my attention. They were running up and down tree branches, helping themselves to some of the seeds on the ground from our bird feeders, and generally enjoying life. As I contemplated what was so compelling, I realized that it was because they were just being squirrels. They were not trying to be cats, or dogs, or birds, but squirrels being totally squirrels, who they were created to be. It occurred to me that we human beings are the only ones on earth who can choose to live in ways that do not reflect our true nature, and we pay a hefty price for that decision.

As followers of Jesus, our call and our challenge is to listen to his words, watch his actions, and get up each day with the goal of doing the same the best we can. Knowing full well that we will never do this perfectly is not a reason to stop trying. With God's help, maybe we become a little more aware of the needs around us every day. Let's be late for an appointment or two this week. That is how we will experience that Peace of God that passes all understanding. Amen