

Supping with Sinners

[Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26]

K Karpen, Sunday, June 5, 2005
Third Sunday After Pentecost

[Matthew 9: 9-13; 18-26, "Supping with Sinners," K Karpen, Sunday, June 5, 2005]

The question I would like to play with today is this one, and it's central to our Gospel passage and also central to how we understand Jesus: Who does Jesus follow? (Or maybe whom does Jesus follow?) Who does Jesus follow?

It's a critical question. So critical, I want to go out and mass-market wristbands & tee shirts with "WDJF" stamped on them. Who does Jesus follow? And why?

In today's reading, Jesus follows three people:

1. Matthew, the tax collector.
2. A leader of the synagogue.
3. A woman who is bleeding.

If we look at them, and look at their stories, we might figure out why Jesus follows them and also ask the question whether Jesus might be following some of us, as well.

This passage is a call story. To avoid any unnecessary confusion, our pew Bibles label it, "The Call of Matthew." Jesus walks up to Matthew, sees him and says two words, "Follow me." And Matthew gets up and follows him. Clearly Matthew does follow Jesus, at least in a sense. And he does it immediately, on the strength of two words.

Now, I love you all. I really do. But if you come by, or call, and say to me, "let's go grab some coffee," I'd have to give it more thought than that. I'd have to look at my calendar. I'd have to think about the other things I was supposed to be doing. I might call home to make sure the kids weren't bouncing off the walls. I might even check my e-mail. Then I'd probably go have a cup of coffee with you. Even though I hate coffee. Because I love you.

Matthew? He's wired differently, I guess. Jesus says, "Follow me," and Matthew leaves behind his booth, his family, his lucrative extortion business, and follows Jesus. Except who's following whom!?

First of all, Jesus finds him, he doesn't find Jesus. Jesus sees him & calls him instantly, and you wonder whether Jesus has had his eye on Matthew; maybe Jesus has been following Matthew for a while. Second, next thing you know they are eating supper "in the house," but whose house is it? Jesus'? Did he have a house? "Foxes have holes & birds of the air have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

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Peter has a house. Says so in the chapter before this one. He's married too; don't tell the Pope. But I think it's most likely Matthew's house. Why? For one thing, it's filled with Matthew's friends: other tax collectors & sinners. I think it's most likely that Jesus follows Matthew home.

Why? Because Jesus is interested in Matthew and in Matthew's friends. He sees something in Matthew. God knows what. He sees something in Matthew nobody else sees. He sees something in Matthew's friends nobody else sees. Certainly, the Pharisees don't see it. They ask the disciples, "Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Now, we know what tax collectors were—people who collected taxes and customs fees for the hated Roman government, taking a healthy cut for themselves, building their own wealth on the backs of the poor. Who likes them? Nobody. Think drug dealers. Think: the worst of New York's landlords. Think: Enron; Tyco; Worldcom. Think: Mafia. Think: those today's *Times* calls the hyper-rich. Anyone who lives off the rest of us. I don't like them. You don't like them. Jesus loves them! But Jesus isn't picky. So much for the tax collectors.

What's a sinner? "Sinner" in the Greek means, "anyone you don't like." But in the Biblical sense it's more specific, more technical. It means people who do not follow Jewish purity laws. So that's us. It means people who don't keep kosher, people who wear fabric blends, people who don't keep ritually clean because they don't know or don't care. And eating with those people can make you ritually unclean as well. Bad thing for a rabbi like Jesus. So, sinners were people like us. Jesus' kind of people.

In a Christian sense, sinner has a related but slightly different meaning. A sinner is anyone who keeps distant from God. That's everybody, at one time or another. Those are Jesus' kind of people. Those are the people Jesus follows. Those are the people Jesus needs. Those are the people who need Jesus, to shorten our distance from God. That's us. Amen?

And all of a sudden, Jesus is crammed into a whole room of the most unlikely people. Supping with sinners. He must have been psyched! Who's the least likely person you know, to come to church? What would it take to get that person to come to church with you? What's keeping them from coming to church?

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You. Me. Christians. People who give people the wrong idea about what the church is. God forgive us. Who forget what a great place it is for people we don't like. For people Jesus loves: people who wear cotton + polyester blends, among other sins; people who find themselves too far from God; people who don't like us because they're people who are like us. That's who Jesus wants to have coffee with. That's who Jesus wants to have supper with. That's who Jesus follows home. That's who Jesus follows. People like us.

But not just people like us. Look at the next character who steps into the plot. A leader of the synagogue. He's devout. He cares about purity. He cares about the law. But right now, he's desperate. His daughter's dead. He needs help. He needs a Pharisee. He needs a rabbi—but he needs a Pharisee, a rabbi who won't mind making himself ritually impure by touching a dead person.

So he finds Jesus. He tells Jesus, "My daughter has died, but come and touch her; come and lay a hand on her, and she will live." He's asking a lot. To touch a dead person makes you unclean, ritually impure. Jesus doesn't have to think about it. "Jesus got up and followed him." Not only does he follow him, but he makes all his disciples follow him, because he's the kind of person Jesus follows. A person who needs him. A person Jesus needs.

And he's tooling along, but suddenly a woman comes up and touches his fringes, touches his tzitzit, the fringes worn by all observant Jewish men, in case you were getting the impression I was saying Jesus wasn't a good Jew. He was a Jew who remembers, like any good Jew, that the law is made for people, not people for the law. And there are times you have to break the law to keep the law. And this woman, too, Jesus follows. Because she needs him. Because he needs her.

Ever get the feeling you're being followed? Let me ask a different way: **EVER GET THE FEELING YOU'RE BEING FOLLOWED?** Maybe Jesus thinks you're his kind of person—a little too far from God; a person who needs him; a person he needs.