

June 18, 2023 – Father’s Day
Meeting People Where They Are
Matthew 9:9-13

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Some stories stick with you for years. The story I am about to tell is one of those stories and is one of the reasons I am so attached to the word, “beloved.”

Years ago, I heard this story while driving down the highway and it caused me to stop my car. I was listening to some educational materials I was thinking about using and a woman started describing something that happened at a retreat for pastors. Each pastor was given an assignment at the beginning of the three-day event to find a name from scripture or a particular passage that overwhelmingly speaks to them. The plan was to share these names with one another at the conclusion of the retreat. So, they got to the end of the retreat, and they started to share their names. Things were going great until one young pastor took the chair and just sat there. The silence became painful. Folks started to squirm. So, the leader asked if he had a name. He said, “I wanted to find a new name. I tried; I really did. But I have a name that is so loud and strong I cannot seem hear anything else. My father gave this name years ago, and he repeated it often.” There was another long silence. In her best therapeutic voice she asked, “Can you tell us that name?” He said, “NOT GOOD ENOUGH.”

I had to sit with that for a while. How many people, I wondered, have a name they cannot override; a name that nags at them; a name that holds them back? For those who grew up in the era of “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” we were told a lie. Names can forever hurt us and define us.

My husband received a note in the mail from a woman about the name she couldn’t shake. Her dad would tower over her as a child and say accusingly, “Who do you think you are?” And the only answer that satisfied him was, “nobody.”

Is there a name that nags at you?

Now this isn't beat up dads' day. Either of these stories could be about mothers or siblings or teachers or classmates, any other significant people in our lives, even ministers. Chances are that most of us have been reckless with name calling at some point in our lives. These hurtful names are compounded by the pressures and expectations of our modern world. Names like, failure, disappointment, loser, trash, dumb, ugly, worthless, weak, evil, less than....they latch on to us like ticks, sucking our power and infecting our thoughts. Sometimes we don't even realize how they are impacting our lives.

I wonder about Matthew's name. To know he is a tax collector is to know he is looked upon with derision. He is working for the Romans, extracting the taxes and tolls of the empire from his own people. Maybe he's an opportunist. Maybe he is doing it because it is the only way he can get out from under his own debt to Rome. I imagine some call him "traitor." The pharisees lumped him into a category called "sinners," along with prostitutes, and anyone else who didn't meet their standards of purity. He was "not good enough" in their eyes and "nobody" with whom you'd want to associate.

Along comes Jesus with a new name for Matthew to try on. Jesus knows exactly who Matthew is? This is Jesus' hometown; he knows all about Matthew. And yet, he walks right up to Matthew's table and says, "follow me." No lecture. No demand for repentance. And those words, "follow me," speak volumes. Jesus invites Matthew to live into his true name, "beloved." His invitation communicates loudly that Matthew is not worthless, but worthy. He is not rejected but accepted. Jesus meets Matthew right where he is and offers the embrace of God's love.

A dinner follows. Matthew is there along with others who bear soul-crushing names. Jesus eats and drinks with them and it is more than the Pharisees can bear. "Why does he eat with those people?" they ask his disciples.

Why does he eat with THOSE people? I'm guessing it is the same reason he eats with us.

I want to tell you the rest of the story about the pastor at the retreat. I pulled into a rest stop to listen. The man continued to sit in the middle of the circle. Instinctively, the other retreat participants gathered around him and laid hands on him. Prompted by the Spirit the retreat leader spoke the words from Jesus' baptism, "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

Who do you know that needs that name and that affirmation? Maybe Jesus didn't say it to Matthew in that way – but his actions and his invitation communicated loud and clear that Matthew was, in fact, a beloved child of God, even as he sat at his tax collecting station. And by sharing a meal, Jesus affirms that name, for Matthew, and all the others who were told repeatedly they were nothing more than sinners.

As you follow Jesus through the gospels you see and hear Jesus inviting people to take on their true name – beloved child of God. He invites them into a relationship with a God who is merciful and kind, calling out the best in us, not affirming the worst; a God who meets us where we are with love and tender affection.

You already know I am a fan of Father Greg Boyle who started Homeboy Industries in LA. He often travels with former gang members to make presentations and appeal for funding. On one of these trips, Eddie tenderly places his hand on Boyle's shoulder and says, "...you know what I love most about Homeboy?" Boyle says, "No, what?" Eddie replies, "That you're not embarrassed by us."

Boyle goes on to write, "The God we've settled for is red in the face and pretends he doesn't know us at parties. But the God we actually have is never embarrassed by us."¹

Jesus refuses to be embarrassed by Matthew and the company he keeps. He is a reflection of the God that delights in eating with us, and then invites us to share that same gracious acceptance with others. Beloved is where we begin our journey with Jesus, not something we have to earn. It is a name that can shape us and our lives as surely as "nobody" and "not good enough."

Too many folks don't know that. They join the chorus of these pharisees trying to explain how people need to shape up and jump through hoops before God's favor will fall on them. They make the ridiculous claim that to accept and love someone, where they are, as they are, is to condone everything they have ever done. This chorus of voices preaches a righteousness built on law and order that benefits the most powerful, while Jesus models a righteousness based on mercy and love for the weakest and most vulnerable. Like the Pharisees, there are many who have yet to figure this out. "Go and learn," Jesus tells these learned men, because they don't get it.

We don't know why Matthew is a tax collector anymore than we know why someone cooks meth, or wounds a child, or acts out. We don't know what names people have been called or the wounds they are tending. We can't always see the battles people are fighting or the mountains they are trying to climb. Instead of getting curious, we too often assume the worst and write people off. We use words like "deserving" or "worthy."

Jesus shows us how ridiculous this is by quoting a proverb: "It is the sick that need a physician."

We don't tell folks they have to be well before they can go to the hospital, do we?

How many times have we heard that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a rest home for saints. That means we are in the business of healing. We are bound by the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. And rather than identifying people by their affliction or diagnoses, we know people

¹ Gregory Boyle, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness," p. 7

by one name, "Beloved." And we are not embarrassed by the company we keep. We meet each other where we are and rather than being sinners in the hands of an angry God, we are welcomed guests at the table of love.

This week I read a devotion that recounted another story told by Greg Boyle in his book, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness."

Half of Anthony's life was spent in jails and detention facilities. Before coming to Homeboy, he had a meth addiction that crippled him as much as his earlier gang allegiance did. His home was filled with violence and he and his twin brother were sent to live with his grandma. Anthony described her as the meanest woman he'd ever known. They were forced to strip down in their underwear and sit in a hallway, after school, every weekend, all summer. She even duct-taped their mouths saying, "I hate the sound of your voices."

"That is why," Anthony reported to Father Greg, "I never shush my girls." He goes on to say, "I love the sound of their voices. In fact, when the oldest one grabs a crayon and draws wildly on the living room wall and my wife says, "DO something! Aren't ya gonna TELL her something?" I crouch down, put my arm around my daughter, and the two of us stare at the wall, my cheek resting on hers, and I point and say, "Now, that's the most magnificent work of art...I have ever seen."²

Boyle concludes: "Here is the Good News: The God we most deeply want IS the God we actually have, and the god we fear is, in fact, the partial God we've settled for. God looks at us and is ecstatic. This God loves the sound of our voices and thinks that all of us are a magnificent work of art. "You're here." God's cheek resting on ours. God's singular agenda"³

The devotion concluded with a little tag line saying:

*Our divinely-given identities and experiences color our horizons like a sunrise.*⁴

Imagine what the world would be like if we called each other the name God gave us.

² Gregory Boyle, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness," p. 8

³ *ibid*

⁴ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/god-delights-in-us-2023-06-15/>