

To Care as Jesus Cared

a sermon preached on the

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by Fr Jim McKenna
priest assistant at St Luke's
& chaplain to Bishopspark

Lecton: Hosea 5:15 - 6:6; Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

Jesus was recognized as a holy man. Yet, He accepted sinners, and because of this, they knew they were acceptable to God. Jesus distinguished between those who sinned and the sin itself. He condemned the sin and forgave the sinner, and His motive for doing so was compassion.

The self-righteous Pharisees and scholars of the law despised sinners, whereas Jesus befriended them. To the Pharisees and Scribes anyone who was outside the law, outside their belief, outside their narrow vision of life, was a sinner. This included the sick, the lepers, and those of foreign lands and cultures. But Jesus associated with them, shared their food and drink. He didn't just tolerate them. He welcomed them. In His presence they felt accepted and loved, just as they were. It is not surprising that so many of them listened to His message and changed their lives.

Matthew is an example of this. More than any other disciple, Matthew had a clear idea of how much it would cost to follow Jesus, yet he did not hesitate for a moment when he decided to leave his tax collecting booth and follow Christ. In doing so, he guaranteed himself unemployment. For several of the other disciples there was always fishing to return to, but for Matthew there was no turning back.

Two changes happened to Matthew. First, Jesus gave him a new life. He not only belonged to a new group, he belonged to the Son of God. He was not just accepting a new way of life – he became an accepted person. For a despised tax collector that must have given him a wonderful feeling.

Secondly, Jesus gave Mathew a new purpose for his skills. When he followed Christ, the only tool he took with him from his previous occupation was his pen. From the beginning God had made him a record keeper. Jesus' call allowed him to put his skills to their finest work. Matthew was a keen observer, and he undoubtedly recorded what he saw going on around him. The Gospel which bears his name came as a result.

Jesus' defense of His associating with those who were branded as unacceptable by society, was quite straightforward. He said He went where the need was greatest. He did not show a lack of moral principles by eating with them, but rather His humanity was rich and deep enough to make contact with that indestructible core of goodness which is found in everyone. He put them in touch with 'that' in themselves. His goodness and love evoked goodness and love in those with whom he socialized.

It is impossible to over-estimate the profound effect Jesus had on people. Those He met felt an irresistible attraction to Him because in Him they found total acceptance – an acceptance that was neither patronizing nor manipulative. Jesus accepted people for who they were. He created a refuge within Himself where the outcasts and marginalized of society felt safe to rip away their masks and expose their life's story.

Those who shared their secrets with Him found He did not point the finger at their faults, but lent them a hand to deal with their failings and fears, and set them free to be fully human and fully alive.

Matthew's experience points out that each of us, from the beginning, is one of God's works in progress. Much of what God has in store for us has been given to us long before we were able to respond to the call. God trusts us with skills and abilities well ahead of schedule. It is up to us to recognize those skills and be willing to set aside our materialistic ambitions in order to meet the disadvantaged on their territory and on their terms.

Like Jesus we must enter people's struggles with them, and in the context of the struggle walk with them on their journey, without judgment.

Our relationships in the community should reflect the compassion and love of Christ. Unfortunately, there are no easy options – just the fact of risking the hassles, the heartaches, and the headaches of becoming involved with people for the sake of love and justice.

References: Matthew 9:9-13
Flor McCarthy
D. Andrews

j.p.mckenna@xtra.co.nz