

Jesus is getting noticed. His teaching drew the crowd. His compassion connected with a Roman centurion. Now, in Matthew 9, Jesus is under the watchful eyes of the Pharisees.

I wonder if he noticed them. The Pharisees come across in the gospels as people who liked to be noticed; even as people who needed to be noticed. They dressed a particular way; lived a particular way; their words and their deeds were designed to draw attention to the proper observance of the law; proper observance as they defined it.

What sets Jesus and the Pharisees at odds is that they completely disagree on what it means to properly observe the law. For the Pharisees, observing the law is a matter of outward behavior; it's a matter of conforming to certain standards. For Jesus, observing the law is a matter of inner orientation; it's a matter of being "transformed by the renewing of our minds" into the image of God who "desires mercy and not sacrifice."

So I wonder if Jesus has a little fun with the Pharisees in Matthew 9. I wonder if he looks up, sees them, then looks over, sees Matthew collecting taxes, and has a sly grin come over his face. "This will teach them.... Hey, Matthew, come follow me.... Let's have a party at your place. Invite all your friends!"

"Invite all my friends, Jesus? Do you know who my friends are? They're not "your kind of people."

"I know. That's the point! Trust me, I'm a doctor."

The morning after a truly memorable feast at Pennside, guess who's coming for dinner? Don't worry if you've over-indulged. The doctor will see you now.

GUESS WHO'S COMING FOR DINNER?

Jesus drew a crowd. Wherever he went, people were attracted to him; people were attracted by him. Throughout the gospels, people meet Jesus, go home and announce, "Guess who's coming for dinner?"

I doubt they did this for the Pharisees. They don't do this for church folks today. When the "tax collectors and sinners" of our day see us, they're indifferent; they go the other way; they're on their guard. They are who they are, and they keep to their kind. We are who we are, and we keep to our kind. They're not comfortable with us; we're not comfortable with them.

The problem isn't that us church folk aren't like those "tax collectors and sinners." The problem is that we're not like Jesus. Jesus attracted them. We repel them. We turn them away. They come seeking Jesus, and we offer them standards of behavior and codes of conduct.

When we do that, we evoke memories of folks like the members of Westboro Baptist Church, who picket at soldiers' funerals and plan to protest at Liz Taylor's funeral. Margie Phelps, ~~Wright's daughter, the group picketed Taylor's funeral, and~~ most likely because of Taylor's gay friends and humanitarian work against AIDS. Phelps also tweeted several attacks on Taylor, including "RIP Elizabeth Taylor is in hell as

sure as you're reading this amperSand getting mad as a wet hen. She should've obeyed God. Too late!"¹

*Matthew 9:12-13 (NRSV) "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*²

People hate in Jesus' name. People equate hate with Christian. The only way to overcome that evil is with good; by stepping up our efforts to love our neighbor in Jesus' name. Our actions and our words, our witness to God's mercy with our mercy; our commitment to love without reservation or hesitation is essential. We must do more than say, "We're not like them." We must show "We're not like them." We must show that the Christian way is marked by mercy and by love.

One writer put the challenge this way: "If mainline churches are at the moment diminishing, it may be in part because we have grown too comfortable with a fellowship of like-minded and like-mannered people.... In every generation the "tax collectors and sinners" will assume a different appearance, but those who claim to be disciples of the Good Shepherd must diligently seek ways of reaching out and drawing them into the banquet of God's people."³

Jesus attracted people. We can attract them too. Have mercy. Show the way of Jesus, so that our neighbor will meet him in us and say, "Guess who's coming to dinner?"

"THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW"

We had a truly epic dinner last night. Over 90 people signed up to attend. That is better attendance than most Sunday's. What did we do right? What can we learn? "If you feed them, they will come." Always true. "People like to have a good time." Also, always true. "If you invite them, they will come."

Any church can grow. Any church anywhere can grow. There are always plenty of people who do not go to any church.

We often think church growth is a matter of style. If we use Power Point and attractive graphics, if we have "good music" (and boy do our definitions of that vary!), if we have "good sermons" (not too long but not too short, not too deep, but not too shallow) then people will come.

Jesus wasn't attractive because of his style. Jesus attracted with his substance. His mission wasn't to build a following. His mission was to save the world. *Matthew 9:12 (NRSV) "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."*⁴ The Doctor will see you now.

Any church can grow. Every church wants to grow. The question is "why do we want to grow?" Too many churches answer: We want to grow to meet our budget. We want to grow to survive.

We want to grow so there are other people to do the work. We want to grow for what we can get rather than what we can give.

¹
http://news.yahoo.com/s/time/20110324/us_time/httpnewsfeedtimecom20110323westborobaptistchurchplanstoprotestelizabethtaylorsfuneralxidrssfullnationyahoo

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵ Maria Carotto Sheidy, Facebook, March 23, 2011.

⁶ Bob McGrath, http://neighborhoodchurches.blogspot.com/2011_01_01_archive.html

That's not an appetizing menu. That doesn't sound like a good time. That doesn't attract. That sounds like sick folks looking for other sick folks to be sick with (and eventually sick of).

The world is full of sick people; we can find them anywhere; finding a doctor, finding a doctor who will see us; that is much harder to find, and it's what we're all looking for.

A friend of mine drew my attention to a very interesting blog. The writer is visiting 50 churches in his area and blogging about the experience. Another classmate commented on the blog that "I found my church by shopping around. I came to a dead stop when my path was made clear"⁵. One week, the writer visited Calvary Chapel: "Calvary Chapel is one of the biggest churches in my town. They have it all—big screens, coffee bar, book store, kids ministries, youth ministries, men's, women's and singles' ministries, schools, broadcast ministries, social media outlets, parenting classes, small groups, Bible study classes, local outreaches and global missions. It is life encompassing, a one-stop shopping center of the Christian religion experience.... The church was very into their own vision, but they didn't seem very interested in *me*.... I was sad when I drove away from the church; not because I was in disagreement or opposed to doctrine, but because I felt like they'd tried to impress me. I wasn't looking for excellence; I was looking to be embraced."⁶

We can embrace people. We can follow Jesus and meet people who are not like us where they are as they are. They're our neighbors. They're our co-workers. They may even be our family. We cannot "be all things to all people," but we're not called to be spiritual chameleons. We're called to love our neighbor.

I invite you to consider the following goals. 1. Build 1 or 2 relationships with someone who comes to Pennside that you don't know. Perhaps you sit on my right, and they sit on my left. Cross the aisle. Reach out. Introduce yourself. You may just be what the doctor ordered. 2. Invite someone to come with you to worship and/or some church activity. Perhaps they're struggling with something in their life right now. You don't have to do a full gospel presentation with "the 4 Spiritual Laws for your Spiritual Flaws." Simply say, "I go to Pennside, and it helps me. Maybe it can help you too." We're just one beggar telling another where to find bread. It's one sick person telling another, "The doctor will see you now."

Any church can grow. Pennside can grow. Follow Jesus in these two areas, but don't do it for Pennside's sake. Us sick folk can smell that foul brew a mile away. Do it because the doctor is in Pennside. Do it because he helped you get well, and he can help your neighbor too.

Matthew 9:12-13 (NRSV) ***"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."***⁷ "Trust me. I'm a doctor." Amen.