

The Wall will Happen?

Matthew 9:9-13

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

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As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "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." (NRSV)

The WALL WILL happen. The Wall won't happen..

And the debate about a Wall on the southern border of our nation keeps us stuck behind walls of hostility & resistance.

We know we need appropriate boundaries to keep us safe and none of us wants to live in a house without walls, especially in the winter!

But when walls divide us from one another and define me over against you, then we have this wall-wrecking Messiah who comes to make "us & them" a "WE" again.

Debbie grew up making a variety of POOR CHOICES:

- Dropping out of school
- Entertaining a vast array of sexual partners,
- Tripping out on heavy drugs
- and craftily manipulating others in a search for more cash.

Debbie and I did not have a LOT in common, except that when we were both young adults, our parents married each other, and we became "sisters."

When Debbie first visited our home, a family member took me aside to say the obvious,

“She’s not like us.”

I could go on with much more about Debbie, but I remember (some time later) when my stepmother got in my face and said,

“You know, Mag. The ‘WELL’ have no need of a physician. Jesus came for the sick!”

Well, the mirror got held up in my face that day!
What I heard the SPIRIT saying was,

“Go ahead, cast the first stone!

Go ahead, point your finger at Debbie’s brokenness.

Go ahead, avoid your own arrogance & contradictions.

But remember, those who take the superior vantage point are going to thoroughly miss JESUS, because Jesus comes for those who know their neediness. And we all need to learn what MERCY means!

In our text this morning, JESUS is in CAPERNAUM, the seaside village where FISHING is the MAIN INDUSTRY... And where the Roman tax system has the fishermen by the throats.

It’s like the bumper sticker I saw the other day that said:
Never have so few taken so much from so many for so long.

That’s how Roman oppression felt.

And the tax collectors were Jews!...

employed by the Romans to exploit their own.
 They are in cahoots with the enemy.
 They are traitors who ARE the enemy.
 Tax booths in Capernaum represent BETRAYAL ...
 The selling of souls to a system that gets into the family
 pockets and rips off their sisters and brothers.
 But JESUS stops at THIS booth and looks at this perpetrator of
 injustice. He sees someone who has made poor choices
 and gotten trapped. And he comes wanting to set captives
 free...
 For Jesus there is no wall between “worthy and unworthy.”
 so JESUS offers not condemnation, but an astounding
 invitation:
 “FOLLOW ME,” he says, and the tax booth is abandoned.

Well, for Matthew, THIS is a brand NEW DAY!
 A LONG, outstretched arm of mercy invites him,
 in all his distress and rejection,
 to come on into a Beloved Community.
 WHAT? YES! he says! YES!

Poet Sheri Hostetler writes;
 Say YES quickly before you think too hard.
 Say YES before you see the to-do list.
 Saying Maybe will only get you to the door,
 but never past it.

Matthew's is a bold YES...
 a wondrous YES...

But a Yes that confounds the community of disciples
 and a real kicker to the fishermen.

Jesus has just invited the one who has ripped off Peter, James and John, their business and their family...
 What is Jesus doing inviting the one who is "NOT like us..."
 to come on in and join the movement?...
 What is Jesus doing bringing THIS Guy into their intimate circle...purposely stirring up conflict?

THIS is NOT what the disciples signed up for!
 ...working toward a kingdom of justice and peace...Yes!
 ...confronting the powers that be! of course!
 ...bringing good news for the poor and sight for the blind...sure!
 Turning what IS~ upside-down?

Well, yes, but maybe not THIS upside-down?!

Here is JESUS~ whose scandalous grace and inclusion of the ENEMY leaves the disciples bewildered.

Here is Jesus knocking down a concrete dividing wall, taking his community by the hand and leading them beyond a fellowship of like-minded, like-mannered folks...
 Taking them behind their prejudice and bringing them all to a table of equal regard.

Jesus' **Beloved Community** is larger than any of them could have imagined! Jesus' shatters the pseudo-security of the little 2x4 worlds we construct and widens the vision. Here's our wall-wrecking Messiah inviting a scoundrel and betrayer to join the fishermen in a community of love and in a common quest for justice.

My elementary classroom included Chucky and Portia.

Chucky's home was a mile outside of town and everyone knew the place. It was a crooked structure that lacked paint and had several old appliances on its front porch and an outhouse in the yard among all the old cars. Chucky came to school every day wearing the same dusty, red plaid shirt and underneath his fingernails the dirt was as black as coal. He was quiet and slow and we made sure he was a loner by building a fence around him that said, "Do not touch."

Portia on the other hand, came from prominence, and she was beautiful, fun, talented leader, and at the height of what it meant to be "COOL!" She set the standard and we built a pedestal for her to stand on, labeled: "brightest and best." Aspire to this!

So I've been having dreams of that Junior High dance in which Chuckie asked Portia to be his date, and she said YES!~ gratefully, because she was just about to ask him the same thing. And at the dance, we all moved off the floor to watch Chucky and Portia so beautifully moving to the same tune, embracing each other.

And I awaken and know that THIS (my friends) is the Kingdom of God- where the goal is not continuing division, but reconciliation and redistribution~ where dividing walls are demolished, and pedestals knocked over, where mountains come down & valleys are filled and where exceptionalism no longer exists. It's where equal regard becomes a visible reality! NO more "WORTHY and UNWORTHY" among nations and peoples. (The U.S. and Haiti dancing as equal partners. Israel

and Palestine embracing each other)...Just Chuckie and Portia valuing one another.

Matthew, is honored by this un-expected invitation, from Jesus to "Come and See."

And in turn, he throws out an invitation to Jesus to
"Come and Dine."

"Come on over and eat dinner with me and my friends."

And Jesus (like Matthew) responds with an immediate

"Yes! I'm eager to party with you and your cronies."

And if we can imagine THAT DINNER.

Here's Jesus enjoying food, drink, laughter,

curious about this crowd

and inviting people to share their stories:

Hi, Jesus, my name is Dave. When my lover got pregnant, I was in a bind and didn't know how to explain this to her husband who was away at war, and well let's just say~ it got ugly, really murderously ugly.

Hi, Jesus, my name is Rahab. I sell sex in order to feed my children. It is not my first choice, but I have been desperate.

Hi, Jesus, I'm Judas, and I've betrayed my best friend for some quick cash. And now I feel like killing myself.

Hi, Jesus! We collect taxes for the Romans.

It started out as a lucrative job,

but now we've gotten caught up in a system

whose weapons are aiming in our faces.

Refusing to submit to the Empire's demands is fraught with danger.

So welcome to our world, Jesus.
It is more complex than anybody out there knows.
Can you help us?

Jesus is NOT in a hurry...and doesn't bring any immediate fix.

He's introduced to folks who others will tell him (and the Pharisees will emphasize) are "not like him," folks who have vastly different lifestyles from his own.

But when Jesus looks across the table,
he sees a hurting humanity who IS like him...
and if I could guess what Jesus tells them, it would be this:

All of us in the human family suffer.
We all experience PAIN.
Bad things happen to us (and sometimes because of us).
Relationships get very messy.
Walls get built by grief, insecurity, disappointment, fear...
But Owing our brokenness is the door to healing...
and the door to one another.
We ALL are the poor ones, "the little poverellos" ...
needy ones, looking for mercy.
We all have PAIN in common.

And the other thing all of humanity has in common is a
CREATOR who loves us
right here,
right now,
just as we are!
and THIS is the grace
broader than the scope of your transgressions.

the grace that may not ever fix the pain,
but will heal the soul...
and the grace that promises to accompany us in all.
Here is JESUS, the Great Physician,
fully present to the people's plight,
accompanying their journeys, and inviting them to
experience the LOVE that brings healing & transformation..
the LOVE he embodies...

Come and see.

Come and see dividing walls knocked down.

Come and see that we are ALL family here.

Jesus must be energized by this vulnerable group who lacks
pretense...no masks here!

And when he looks into the eyes of folks like David, Rahab,
Judas and Matthew, he literally sees his own kin.

He sees those struggling with issues that don't have quick
remedies.

And his gut is moved with compassion.

Jesus NEVER looks down from a superior vantage point,
but looks across the table with equal regard.

Equal regard is the highest form of love.

The I-THOU relationship that the Creator offers humanity.

This is the Jesus who knows our foibles & contradictions,
sins and sickness,

& comes into our hiding places

to eat with us, if we just open the door.

I wish I could tell you the story today about how Debbie and
I bonded as sisters and how our relationship transformed
each other's lives. But that never happened,

before Debbie's drug-related illness killed her.
I wish I could tell you that Chuckie and Portia really danced together, dismantling domination and oppression but that too, is still the dream...
Chuckie disappeared from our excruciatingly cruel environment, sometime during Jr. High.

And these un-healed relationships are about MY contribution to divisions, and MY need for mercy.

This equal regard kind of love is Difficult.
Loving our neighbors as ourselves... not easy...
Being mindful about how we communicate when there is conflict takes energy...
Owning our self-righteous judgments and hardness of heart takes courage,
And breaking down walls in our polarized church, society and personal relationships is hard work.

Still... we are all invited into the Beloved Community in which un-likeminded folks come together, listen to one another's stories, and seek understanding across our differences...
And God's kingdom is built like Maya Angelou expresses:
 "with a love that
 jumps hurdles,
 leaps fences,
 penetrates walls to arrive
 at its destination full of hope."

The destination JESUS offers us today is a PEACE- with no more inner hostility and no more hostility between "us" and "them."

The destination JESUS offers us today is a MERCY that makes us family.

The destination Jesus offers us today is a table of equal - regard where we're all invited!