

## “Doctor, Doctor”

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In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.' *Luke 2:8-10*

And as [Jesus] sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” *Mark 2:15-17*

Today's lesson comes just after the narrative of Jesus calling Levi to follow him. Levi makes his living collects taxes, customs on goods that cross the border. Such customs agents can set their own prices as long as the required tax revenue is collect. As profiteers, collaborators with the Roman government, they are not popular.

Calling Levi and his guests *sinners* is the scribe's way of showing his contempt for them. Pharisees try to embody every aspect of the Law in their daily lives, all 613 pieces of the law found in the Hebrew Bible. They can sometimes become sanctimonious around people who are less concerned with such things.

There's no law against Jewish people – like Jesus – eating with other Jews, even if they're tax collectors. But Pharisees, who seek to keep a higher standard of holiness than ordinary people, would generally choose not to do so.

No doubt they already know about Jesus, know that he is a teacher and rabbi. They can see into the courtyard of Levi's home where Jesus and his disciples have joined the guests. Can see them talking and laughing and eating together. And these scribes of the Pharisaic sect voice their objections.

“How can he stand to eat with such riffraff? What kind of example is he setting?”

Jesus responds with a common proverb, “Those who are well have no need of a physician.”

Are you the type of person who goes to the doctor at the first sneeze or achy head, wanting to nip every illness in the bud? Or do you wait and see what develops? My friend Grace had been through cancer treatment a few years before I met her thirty years ago. I guess she had had enough of doctors and medical care in general. When she got sick, with an ear infection or food poisoning, she would say, “If it doesn't kill me in three days, I guess I'm going to live.”

Jesus asks, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick?” Whichever style we have, and while not negating the value of preventative medicine – indeed we could use more of that – we all realize that it's the sick who need a doctor.

A church made a video a few years ago, trying to market themselves as a relevant, authentic faith community. In it, a 20-something young man explained why he hadn't been going to church. He tried going to a number of local churches but the people there seemed like they had it all together. They didn't all act pious, but they definitely acted like they were already in a good place, like they didn't need God, like they didn't need a savior.

This man was looking for a place where people did not seem so confident their own privileged place with God. He paraphrased today's lesson saying that he always thought church was a place for the spiritually sick, for sinners if you will.

This young man wanted to find a church where people knew they needed a savior. "Why We Need a Savior" is our theme in these four weeks before Christmas. Who needs a savior? We do. We need a God who comes to us and reaches out to us. One who touches our brow when we feel unwell and comforts us when the ways of the world, or our own ways, leaves a knot in our bellies.

Jesus came into the world, and came into Levi's home, to give new meaning to the phrase, the "coming of the Lord." Not only does he come into God's creation generally but he comes personally wherever he is needed, in this case to dinner with some tax collectors, people that the religious elite wouldn't dream of visiting.

Jesus redefines the coming of God's realm as a time of salvation, when people are freed from whatever holds them captive. In church-speak, from the powers of Satan.

How exactly would we define these powers today? What are those things that hold you captive?

I remember when Kellyn was young how we were living from paycheck to paycheck. The kids were eating free lunches at school. We crossed our fingers that the truck would keep running. And the furnace. The stress was terrible. Mike and I had many... discussions about money and spending. As keeper of the finances, I had the dubious honor of trying to keep us in the black.

Maybe you feel like you're caught in a money pit. If 72 percent of households are spending more than they earn – as I learned last week – that means that many of us here are living in debt. We need a savior. One who will keep us centered but also one who will point us in the right direction to lead us from our captivity. Maybe we need to offer a money management class right here come January.

Maybe this is not your particular demon. Maybe you are struggling with your addiction, or if not addiction then your habit of leaning too much on those things that you hope will make life seem more bearable. Whether it's food or drink ... uh, excuse me (*picking up cell phone*) ... just a moment while I take care of this... Whether it's food or drink, exercise or shopping, all of us have *something* we can sometimes do too much of.

Sometimes we use these habits to try to fill a hole within us. Sometimes they're simply habits that take over our lives. We need a savior, to remind us that God desire that we live in wholeness and in relationship, celebrating all of it. We need a savior to remind us that even when no one calls or texts, even when you're not sure you can pay that bill, even when the usual distractions don't work, Christ never abandons us. "We are not alone. Thanks be to God."

Jesus tells us today that he comes *for us!* God does not expect us to act like we are perfect. God knows us too well for that. God wants us to admit that we need help because it's a lot easier to

accept help when you know you need it than it is when you're pretending that you're fine on your own.

Too often I act as if I'm okay when I'm not; maybe you do too. But this becomes a handicap that gets in the way of our accepting the gift of acceptance, hope, and love that God offers us. It can also get in the way of others being able to see God through Christ in us.

Most of us struggle at least sometimes with disbelief that God would want to have anything to do with us. Yet God knows us better than we know ourselves. And knowing us, God *still* longs to be a part of our lives.

This is why Jesus says, "Come, everyone who is struggling and carrying burdens. And I'll give you rest" (Mt 11:28). He means us.

I challenge you this Advent season to begin living again as if you *need* Christ, need this spiritual physician. When you catch yourself putting on that mask of self-sufficiency, pause for a moment. Think about why you are doing it. Who are you trying to convince?

If that mask is the right thing for that moment, then continue. But I'm guessing there will be times when you find that this act of pretending you have it all together is a habit that interferes with your connecting with God.

Uncomfortable though it may be, vulnerability is the best attitude to put on when approaching God. Having a lot of questions is better than having all the answers.

Contrary to what some churches teach, believing in God through Jesus Christ does not mean that bad things don't happen or that we won't sometimes struggle to find hope. Quite the opposite. Believing in God opens us to the needs of the people around us. And the world is in dire need. In believing, you will lament. You're going to wonder where to find hope.

This is actually a healthy response when it leads us to take our questions and confusions to God. And maybe to the people caught in those situations. In Palestine this fall, our pilgrim group talked about hope. With everything that the Palestinian people have to endure, how can they have hope? How can we? And yet they did. One woman in Haifa explained that she is not privileged *not* to hope. Hm.

Hope is elusive. It's often not what we expect. Situations may not improve in the foreseeable future, but God is still present. The sun still rises each morning. And when we open our senses, we discover that God surrounds us with an abundance of good things, even in our worst nights.

This is the good news of great joy that the angels sang about. This is God's hope for us.

We all need a savior. Thank God we have one in Christ Jesus!