

Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

Responding, Restoring, Rejoicing!

I parked and as I did so I noted the two men and a woman on the fire escape. As I got out of the car and said good morning, the woman called me over. She is someone who is around the church often. She is not well. Generational trauma has her caught up in a cycle of abuse and addictions. Today though, her prayer was for her daughter. "Please pray for my daughter on Sunday" was her request. "She is missing and they have taken her children." One of the gentlemen with her explained that the children had been taken and they did not know where they were.

Sadly, this and stories like it are the norm for the community members around our church. Addictions, death, missing persons, children removed from parents...all part of the ongoing struggle of a people who live with the outcomes of the residential school system.

Then there are those who are ill that are in need of company and assurance that someone is with them. Often it is when faced with illness that faith comes into play. Maybe faith is a place where hope resides. This can be for those who grew up Christian and for those who know very little about God.

And then there is the despair of those who have experienced deep loss. The loss of a child or partner, the loss of a cherished and dear one. The fear and unknowns of a future in which one finds themselves in the pit of grief and loneliness, a hole so large that your chest feels as if it is a crater or a void that cannot be filled.

People are looking for hope, for someone to respond or to respond to the presence of someone. People hope to be restored in relationships, health, wellness, and when that happens all involved rejoice.

The scripture you heard today seems to be of three unrelated events with people at very different junctures of their lives. Similar to the examples I have shared. In the scripture we hear of a man sitting minding his own business at a tax booth, another man pleading for life to be restored to his lifeless daughter, and a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Each scene as different as it can be from the other, but the common thread is Jesus.

In the case of Matthew, the tax collector, Jesus sees him and says, "Follow me." We don't know all of the background of this story. It may be that Matthew knew about Jesus and he was ready for the call. It could be that in Jesus he saw a new hope, a different future, even if he could not know what that future might be. In this case, Matthew responded to Jesus' call and followed, but not only that, he threw a party, where Jesus

dined with others just like Matthew, sinners and tax collectors. It is a time for rejoicing and inviting. It is time to be in community. And the disciples that have been called thus far are questioned by the Pharisees as they ask, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (v11)

Now it would be easy to judge the Pharisees and think that they are not being God's people. But how many of us would wonder the same thing given the circumstances. Why hang out with ungodly people? It is like you are dragging God's good name through the mud. But Jesus comes responding to needs and restoring people to wholeness and community. That is what he does.

The question itself is not a problem. At this time in our church's history we are practicing asking "why?" in any number of circumstances. Why do we worship as we do? Why do we do things as we do? It is not so that we get rid of everything, but it is so that we can articulate a particular way of being and doing as valuable and continue doing it or maybe look at changing what has become common practice in our relationships with one another and in community.

In the next vignette, a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before Jesus saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." (v18) Responding is part of the relationship with Jesus, it is a first step. In this case the man responds to what he knows of Jesus and taking a risk, likely out of desperation, he goes to Jesus. Jesus too responds, by going to the child, restoring her life and restoring her to her father. The risk is that approaching Jesus is dangerous. The rulers of the synagogue hold him in suspicion as do the Roman authorities. Still the life of his daughter is worth the risk for the leader.

What is not so evident, given the time we live in, is that children were mere possessions. They had no rights and privileges. Many children died young and girls were considered lower than boys. The fact that this story is about a child, about a girl, and that Jesus responds to that is breaking more barriers and speaks loudly to the value of the life of this child and all children.

Though we are not told of the father and family's reaction to the life-giving action of Jesus we can imagine, given the risk taken, and the decision of Jesus to respond, that there was rejoicing in the home. Certainly, report of this resurrection experience spread throughout the district. (v26).

As Jesus is dining and dealing with the questions of the Pharisees, then giving attention to the ruler of the synagogue, getting up to leave to go to his home, another person in need, a woman whose bleeding causes her to be unclean, well, she in desperate faith said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." (v21) One must understand that her bleeding separated her from community. Her bleeding made it so no one could touch her without becoming unclean as well, and there were religious laws about such things, so who would risk it.

And women were chattel; possessions a little ahead of children on the societal ladder rung. Men certainly did not stop to talk to a woman or heed their need and not in public. The woman responded to Jesus' presence in hope of healing, and Jesus responded to her seed of faith with the words, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was healed.

Again, though there is no party, you can bet the freedom the woman experiences is life changing and she is doing a happy dance even if only she knows it.

I also love the connection between Jesus calling the woman, "daughter" and the fact that he is on his way to restore another's daughter. People to this day do not realize the impact Christianity has had on empowering women. In churches where women are still not given full rights to be in positions of decision making and preaching, looking at the value Jesus placed on women in his life and ministry, compared to the society in which he lived, could provide the church and the world with a different perspective.

Jesus responded to people and people responded to Jesus. Lives were restored, people impacted, and it did not matter if it was a tax collector who ate with sinners and was a sinner himself, a ruler and leader, a child, or a woman in need of hope and help. Being in relationship with Jesus changes things, restores people and communities to the hope of God for the world. A world where the most vulnerable and the outcast, the rich and powerful, all know the love of God and the restoring touch of the Jesus.

In our time that love and restoration is given to us in the power of the Holy Spirit and it is for us to be the touch that changes individual lives and the community, maybe even providing a ripple effect into the broader world.

And each time a life is changed we rejoice! We respond, we restore, we rejoice! If we are not impacting lives, lives of those who are struggling with poverty, illness, homelessness, hunger, impacting the lives of those making wrong choices, grieving, and providing a space in our hearts and lives for them, then we are missing out on the call on the church and on us as individuals to be the touch of Jesus, the love of God, and the witness to the hope of being restored to relationship with God and others.

We are people who are called to respond, restore, and rejoice. In Christ, with Christ and through Christ. May we do it boldly, even if it with some fear and trepidation, yet trusting that God's got this and we rejoice in the opportunity to be God's people in the world.