

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

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.”

While he was saying these things to them,
suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying,
“My daughter has just died;
but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.”
And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years
came up behind him
and touched the fringe of his cloak.
For she said to herself,
“If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.”

Jesus turned, and seeing her he said,
“Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”
And instantly the woman was made well.

When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd
making a commotion, he said,
“Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.”
And they laughed at him.

But when the crowd had been put outside,
he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.
And the report of this spread throughout that district.

There are two restructurings in the background of this lectionary Scripture. First the composer of Matthew recast Mark’s stories of calling a tax collector (Levi in Mark and Matthew in Matthew), eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:13-17) and fasting (2:18-22) and linked them with the stories of Jairus’ daughter (in Mark; a synagogue leader in Matthew) and the woman who touched Jesus’ garment (5:21-43). The Matthean storyteller both reorders and greatly shortens Mark’s conflict and healing stories. The

reason for Matthew's major cutting of Mark's stories may be explained by the limits of a storytelling evening in the ancient world. If, as is probable, the Gospels were composed for a performance straight through in an evening, Matthew had a problem. Mark's story is a little more than two hours, a relatively short storytelling evening in oral cultures. Matthew included a lot of Jesus' teachings plus a genealogy, a birth narrative and a longer resurrection story. In its final form, Matthew's Gospel is approximately an hour and a half longer than Mark, three and a half hours or so. The length of the compositions is reflected in the number of pages. In a typical modern edition of the NRSV, Mark is 22 pages and Matthew is 35 pages (Luke 38 and John 28). In order to keep his story within the listening capacity of ancient audiences (far more accustomed to long stories than modern audiences), he had to shorten Mark's stories wherever possible. The committee that created the common lectionary did the second redaction. They decided to leave out the story of the fasting controversy (9:14-17) in order to include the more interesting stories of the dead daughter and the woman who touched Jesus' garment.

In this modern shortening of Matthew, the calling of Matthew, the controversy about eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the healing of the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, and the afflicted woman are linked together. The connection between these stories is that they are about Jesus and outsiders. The tax collectors were the ultimate outsiders in the Israel of Jesus' day. They were traitors who collected taxes for the Romans. Everyone hated them and with good reason. Their racket was to sign a license with the Romans in which they agreed to deliver the amount that was required for their district and then to collect more than the Romans demanded and keep the excess for themselves. As a result, most of the tax collectors were rich and they were rich on the basis of bribery and extortion. The Romans needed to provide some incentive for Israelites doing a dirty job for them so they ignored the blatant corruption of the system.

Jesus calling a tax collector to be his disciple and then eating with tax collectors and other sinners was highly controversial. Both discipleship and eating meals together established a covenantal relationship that was a sacred trust. Calling tax collectors as disciples and eating with tax collectors was an ancient version of establishing a collaborative relationship with the Mafia, openly corrupt politicians or plain old crooks. They were "outsiders" who lived in open disdain for the law. It's unthinkable that a rabbi would call a tax collector as a disciple. It may be that this reflects "Matthew's" experience. We don't know who the Matthew was. But given that it is the Gospel according to Matthew, the ascription invites us as listeners and readers to make a connection between this tax collector and the composer of the Gospel. Furthermore, the implication of the story is that he and perhaps other tax collectors changed their ways.

In its original context, Jesus' action is a complete surprise. His invitation to the tax collectors and other sinners to follow him was unprecedented. The shock for the religious

people of his day was that he was supposed to be concerned about those who were practicing Israelites and observed the cleanliness and dietary laws. That surprise and shock needs to be communicated in the way that the story is told. Often this is read as a factual everyday event rather than the exceptional, extraordinary thing that it presents to ancient and modern audiences.

The woman who touched his garment was also an outsider because she had a hemorrhage of blood for twelve years. She was ritually unclean. She could not have any normal social interaction with people. She could not go to the synagogue or have a meal with anyone outside the family. No one could touch her, sit on anything that she had touched, or eat from dishes that she had used. Being unclean like this for twelve years was a sentence of condemnation not unlike solitary confinement in a modern prison. For Jesus the woman touching him made him unclean according to the law. The possibility was that Jesus would realize what she had done, rebuke her and tell her to get away from him. An unclean woman touching a man involuntarily was a big deal for someone who was concerned about ritual cleanliness. Persons would have to remove themselves for a day for all social contact, take baths, and wash all of their clothes in order to be ritually clean again. Jesus ignores the fact that the woman made him unclean by touching him. Instead he blesses her and addresses her as a daughter. The climax of Matthew's story is that the woman is healed after Jesus' blessing rather than at the moment when she touches Jesus' garment as in Mark.

The story of the woman's healing is embedded in the story of a young girl who has died. But the surprise in all of these stories is the degree to which Jesus gives these "outsiders" attention. The same is true in the healing of the synagogue elder's daughter. Jesus was having dinner and the synagogue leader interrupted dinner and begged him to come and heal his daughter. An ancient Jewish father would be concerned about his daughter. Jesus got up and went with him.

This story also involves Jesus' attitudes toward a strict interpretation of the law. Anyone who touched a dead body other than a close relative was made unclean. When he took her by the hand, there was the possibility of his contracting uncleanness. He had declared that she was only sleeping but everyone else including her father thought she had died. His taking her by the hand was then a possible violation of the law. He thereby demonstrates a disregard for this strict interpretation of the law and obeys the greater law of compassion for the afflicted.

In each of these stories, therefore, Jesus didn't pay attention to the strict observance of the law. He called anybody. He allowed this woman to touch him and he touched this "dead" girl. In each instance it's important to convey that these things are surprising. Jesus' way of acting here is not what you would expect. His behavior is shocking. In each instance,

Matthew's version of this, which leaves out some of the stuff that Mark included that in many ways made the stories more interesting, goes right to the heart of the matter. Jesus saw the situation, he acted, people were made well, that's it.

The stories convey a surprising response on Jesus' part in the context of the religious laws and practices that were customary at his time in history. He breaks through all of these legal constraints for the sake of the people he was encountering.

What then do these stories reveal about God? The reiterated implication of this particular set of stories is that Jesus makes clear God's priorities. God is reaching out to those on the other side of the boundaries set by the prevailing norms in the culture and the law. Jesus' inclusion of tax collectors, sinners, and those who are "unclean" in his compass of care and healing power is a sign of God's government and ongoing activity in the world. These stories invite us to consider the ways we might reach out to those "on the other side" of the prevailing norms of our culture and laws including criminals and those in prison. In particular, God is seeking to heal women who are afflicted with not only specific conditions but also the unique estate of women in a male dominated world.