

August 2, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Scripture: Acts 2, Matthew 8 and 9
Title: Our Soul Longs for Community



The gospel of Matthew is the first book in the New Testament. Matthew retells stories about Jesus healing people. If you look at chapters 8 and 9, you will find a collection of healing stories. Jesus heals the lepers; he heals Peter's mother in law and two demon possessed men. He heals a paralytic, a bleeding woman, another blind and a mute and he has dinner with tax collectors and sinners.

We could talk about each of these stories at length, usually sermons focus in on one passage. But sometimes when we focus on the singular tree, we miss the forest. So, there's lessons to be found in each one, but is Matthew saying something as well in the stories all together? Is there an overarching message? Is there a lesson he is teaching over and over and over and over with different examples? I think so.

All of these folks, lepers, demon possessed men, paralytic, bleeding women, blind and mute and tax collectors really have the same serious condition. Those who would be treated in our medical systems today would probably be seen by various specialist on different floors of the hospital, but for Matthew's purpose, they all suffer from the same condition.

Now, you might be wondering about the tax collectors Jesus had supper with. Might wonder why I've included them in this set of sick and diseased. Tax collectors were part of this group by their association with the Romans.

All these people suffer the same. Jesus addresses the root cause of all these people's problems and in doing so, Jesus cured their deepest wounds. Their shared wound was separation from community. They were all ostracized from their community. They were living in exile. They were excluded and on the margins. They were rejected and alone. Physical disease and disability meant they could not gather with others; they could not enter worship space; they were ritually unclean and unwelcome.

After Jesus was executed, his followers began to gather and what we call the church began to form. We hear in the writing of Acts what those communities looked like, what they did. Listen with me to these words from

Acts 2 :

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Salvation was about community. They devoted themselves to learning and fellowship with one another. They ate meals together; they broke bread together; they sang songs together; they took care of one another's needs.

People want a place to belong; people yearn for a place to connect, to be welcomed, to be a part, to be valued, to learn, to rejoice, to mourn, to strive for greater goals, to love and be loved. That's what the church is to offer. That's one way the church is to bring healing into the world. That's being the church. That's one reason our physical distancing from one another is so painful these days. We need each other. We need to be a part of community where we can learn and grow and love.

Why Church? I sent a random sample email to some Saint Paul folks before beginning this series. Here's how folks that usually sit next to you in these pews responded:

*I love St. Paul. I come to stay spiritually connected,
and meet new friends!*

Going to church gives me a spiritual "lift". Being with the community of friends who are like family, all worshipping together, helps me to define my priorities and and decide what is truly important in the world.

I come to church for familiar traditions, to be "charged" for my week, to reflect and to give my family an understanding that we are part of a greater community, both worldly and otherwise.

I want a sense of community, of belonging to something that enhances what I already believe. I also am a life long learner, I love to learn new information...

Worship. Community. Mercy. Spirit.

Relationship.

A consistent reason people give for coming to church is about community. Having others to share this journey of faith, having others to share our doubts and discoveries, having others to share our joys and our pains, having others to join us in making the world better, is vitally important. There is strength in belonging to something bigger than oneself that even introverts and independent souls can appreciate. 2020 pandemic has challenged us in our sense of community. We have formed virtual community as we remain eager to know when we can be in physical community again.

Those who participate in churches are in them because they have found a place of belonging, a community of connection to grow and serve, and work together to bring forth change. But you know those who are not part of faith communities. You have friends or family who have left the church or never entered. They have their reasons for not being here. One of their most common reasons given for those who are NOT part of a church community is not feeling welcome.

I have had conversations with these folks too. Women told me when their church found out they were being abused, or were divorcing, the women found themselves no longer welcome at their church, although their male counterparts could remain. I have had gay, lesbian and transgender people ask me if we are really welcoming like our sign says. LGBTQ+ folks have found it hard to trust welcome signs because they have experienced others who have tried to get them in the door in order to fix them, I have spoken with people of color who have asked about church worship time then clarified if it was okay to come to church if they weren't white. I've had people tell me stories of soul-wounding exclusions, of Christian judgmentalism, what a sad world we live in still that people have had such experiences of church communities such that the number of folks who seek community **outside** of church grows greater every year. Folks trust strangers at a coffee shop or bar more than those inside a church.

That's a reason it is so important for us to be the church God calls us to be. To hold together through difficult times and distanced times and to show up virtually until our doors open and to show up physically when we can open the doors- and to invite others to show up to be with us. We have to show up - to be the church - where wounded souls can find a home, a place of belonging.

In Matthew's world, people who were diseased or distressed, were exiled from the community, the problem is that remains the same still today. That's why your presence as Saint Paul community is so important. We say we welcome all, then we need folks here to welcome others when they arrive. We desire to encounter God, who lives and dwells in each of us, we need each other in all our diversity. We need to be here for each other.

We need to be here to bring the holy expectancy of God into our community. We need to be here to remember who we are and who's we are and what's really important and what will take priority and what will be our God.

Being a follower of Jesus isn't easy. At times, we have questions and doubts, Jesus teaches we are supposed to love our enemies and share in abundance and forgive those who offend us and love kindness and do justice and offer healing to others, and it's just not easy, so we need each other.

We come together to journey together, to create space of hospitality where others may come, to honor the presence of God who joins us here.

Why Church?

- #1 grow in connection to God. to experience sacred,
- #2 to become a better person
- #3 to find Comfort/ Meaning in times of sorrow
- #4 to be part of a Community

These are some of the why church answers. I hope that you will reflect on your answer and share your invitation for others. May we be the church God calls us to be, alive, vital, challenging, comforting, welcoming, now and always. Amen.