

Message: "Miracle Whiplash" - 6-7-2026

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

⁹As 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. ¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

¹⁸While 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." ¹⁹And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." ²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. ²³When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. ²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶And the report of this spread throughout that district.

There are Republicans and Democrats, there are Griz fans and Cat fans, there are flat-earthers and round-earthers, there are motorcyclists and all the rest - humans are creatures of divisions, of groupings, of categorizations that separate and identify and exclude and include all at once. We even see this dynamic played out in our congregation.

I don't know if you realize this, but we are not an entirely united congregation; we have divisions in this place, in this body; and this morning, I would like to point out one particular division that is regularly overlooked; it is a division that affects us all. We have two different groups that you are probably not aware of, but they are very real. These two divisions, these two groupings each have specific designations: there are the NPS's, and the SPS's. Everyone here, without exception, is a member of one or the other; there is no neutral ground. NPS's typically have slightly less obscured perspectives upon primary worship functions and acoustics. SPS's typically get more sun and exercise. There are advantages and disadvantages to being included in either group.

Have you figured it out yet? Are you an NPS or an SPS? It's important today because the SPS's have done something that is tantamount to outright rebellion - they've made a drastic change in their ranks that obliterates the familiarity we have grown accustomed to. Now, SPS's aren't known for being so direct in their efforts to effect change, but neither have they been known to be silent in the face of opportunities which are important to our ministry. But this particular change is radical; I mean, it affects half of our congregation and threatens to destabilize our status quo.

Are you wondering if your pastor has gone crazy? Well, let me ask you, has anyone noticed anything different in our sanctuary today? (shorter pew)

We have a shorter pew on the south side! And this was done by the SPS's - the South Pew Sitters. That's the group that's upsetting the apple cart; not the NPS's, which are the North Pew Sitters. Now, you may think I'm being silly, but you must admit - all of you belong to one group or the other. Remember, I see you every Sunday, and, except for newcomers, most of you have your particular side you sit on, let alone your particular seat that you subconsciously claim - am I right? Or am I right?

And look at what the SPS's have done! They've removed one of the full-length pews and inserted a shorter-length pew - the nerve! Our crucial normative function is compromised; I bet more than one person was made to move to another place for worship today - which is tantamount to a cardinal sin, if we were Catholic. "Thou shalt not mess with congregational seating".....

If I had a sound effect button up here on the pulpit, I would now press the button for "sound of brakes squealing," for it is obvious I am playing with you - but it illustrates just how easy it is to divide people into groups. Let me set the record straight. Over a year ago, our worship team talked about doing this change in our pews; trustees approved the change, but we never got around to doing the work until our very capable Marilyn Oliverrez and trustee chairperson Steve Egli simply said, "Let's do it!" and between Steve and Marilyn and her husband Jim, we were able to make the switch in record time (just over an hour on Thursday, I believe?).

But why switch out a full-size pew for a half-size pew? It has so very much to do with our scripture lesson today, something which people of faith, if they follow Jesus, have learned is an absolutely indispensable part of their lives - to try to make sure no one is overlooked.

This is the main theme of Jesus and his interactions in the gospel today. He comes across someone who belongs to one of the most hated professions of that age - the tax collector Matthew. He was an extremely dubious figure people went out of their way to avoid; he was used to being overlooked. And here we have Jesus inviting him to join him for dinner. At the dinner there were others society made a habit of overlooking; they were lumped together under the umbrella term "sinners" but whoever they were, they were recognized as people who were not worth recognizing. Jesus did more than recognize them; he ate with them, something in that culture you only did with those considered worth being close to. Then, a leader of the synagogue came to Jesus; this was someone who likely was overlooked perhaps in a different way, as one of the more elite members of

society; perhaps the overlooking was an opposite kind, with the sinners and tax collectors gathered with Jesus for dinner casting a spiteful glance in his direction, begrudging his power and position; it is, after all, quite understandable when the have-nots look critically at the haves. But again, Jesus paid full attention to his angst; his daughter had died, yet he still held hope bundled in faith - "come and lay your hand on my daughter" was an appeal Jesus could not ignore. It was the same with the woman made unclean by chronic bleeding who was used to people shunning her impure state; Jesus paid full attention to her condition and her need, and worked healing, both physical and spiritual.

Jesus shows us here and elsewhere that he is not one to overlook the human condition, especially when that condition is broken or different or suppressed. He is representing God's perspective toward what he has created; Jesus reveals a God who insists on noticing, uplifting, healing, engaging, and nurturing those left behind or outcast by society - those who are overlooked. God's love seeks the accommodation of all; God's love pays attention where others have lost interest; God's love sees what others miss - but could see if they took another look.

This brings us back to the shortened pew situation in our church. The worship team noticed something a year or so back; we noticed that when a person using a wheelchair came to our worship service, they had very little choice in where to sit. You can envision that the only choices were way in the back or way up in front on the side - in the back the person would be sitting alone, and up front the person would be sitting next to the half pew almost no one ever sits in. In other words, they would sit alone. We thought we could do better. The half-pew in the center of the south side of the sanctuary affords triple the spaces dedicated to wheelchair accessibility and makes it much more likely they would not have to sit alone as well as having a better vantage point to take things in.

This may seem like a whole lot of effort for something that may or may not happen in the future, for we do not regularly have someone who uses a wheelchair attend worship. But we did - for a few months, we did have someone attend who used a wheelchair. Many times, she sat alone, here up front or in the back. The worship team noticed this, as did I. We realized perhaps we could do better, that perhaps we could do something to make our worship space more accommodating, for her or anyone in the future who may use a wheelchair. And so we moved the pews; we paid attention to something we had overlooked before. It is our hope that by moving our pews around we may be able to attend better to those we've overlooked in the same way. One very small step - but a step nonetheless.

And, in a small way, we were following the lead of Jesus, trying to do what we can to not overlook someone who possibly gets overlooked a lot.

Jesus addresses individuals whom society tends to exclude. Often, society excludes for obvious reasons; but sometimes we exclude without even thinking about it; we exclude culturally, physically, mentally, economically, ethnically, emotionally, and a whole host of other ways that often escape our attention even as those who are excluded may feel it deeply. Jesus raises this awareness in those who would make God's love their own. Jesus invites us to step out of our sense of normality and consider the experiences of others in how they experience our same world - and to have love shape our vision. Jesus invites us to replicate his attention towards the excluded in all the ways we can. **OUR CALLING AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS IS TO EXCEED SOCIETY'S BOUNDARIES OF CONSIDERATION, MOVING DEEPER INTO THE ACCOMMODATION OF PEOPLE'S NEEDS AS BEST WE CAN.** The pews are just one small example; we have many other ministries of such accommodation as our regular function, from making sandwiches for the Poverello Center on Saturday mornings, to lessening our carbon footprint by operating solar panels on our rooftop, to volunteering with the Housing Advocate Network, to partnering with Common Good Missoula on legislation advocacy efforts, to showing up at city council meetings to advocate for those who are houseless, to our Tzedakah pocket assistance helping families in emergency situations, to our coming alongside an Afghan family struggling to keep their loved ones safe in their home country, to our growing commitment of support for PRIDE and the upcoming PRIDE parade on June 20th.....the list goes on. I'm extremely proud of our church and its ministries of practical assistance and love-centered engagement; I hope you are as well.

But our pride needs to always be tempered by the humility of Jesus's call to pay attention to those still overlooked by society, those still oppressed, those still vilified, those still being broken, those still being treated unjustly. That list goes on as well. And we need to pay the kind of attention rare in the world these days, the attention that unconditional love demands. So let us continue the good work of putting our faith into action in the many ways we do; but let us never fail to ask the question Jesus always invites us to consider - who are we missing? Who are we overlooking? God does not demand that we accommodate everyone; but God certainly invites us to try and do what we can. The love of God never rests as long as real human need beckons; neither should we.