

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Second Sunday after Pentecost

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There is a question simmering beneath today's Gospel. It's not stated outright, but it's there. The question is this: Who gets to come close to Jesus? Or maybe even more bluntly: Who does Jesus move toward, and who does he move away from? Because that's really what's happening in this passage. Jesus is sitting down to dinner with tax collectors and sinners. And I think we hear those words so often that we stop hearing how scandalous they really were. And notice that Matthew doesn't just say sinners. He says tax collectors and sinners. Those could be two very different groups. Some of the so-called sinners were probably people who had been pushed to the margins of society. The tax collectors, on the other hand, often had money. They had economic status. They worked with the occupying Roman government. They were viewed as traitors. Sinners and tax collectors. Some were victims. Some were collaborators. Some were poor. Some were wealthy. Some had been excluded because of what had been done to them. Some had been excluded because of what they themselves had done. And somehow Jesus ends up sitting at the same table with all of them. And the real scandal isn't that Jesus speaks to them. The scandal is that he eats with them. He shares a meal with them. He enjoys their company. And the religious leaders can't understand it, can't stand it. "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" It's an ancient question. And every generation asks it. Who shouldn't be here? Who doesn't belong? Who is beyond redemption? Who makes us uncomfortable? Who should be kept at a distance? And Jesus refuses the question itself. Before he can even finish the meal, he's interrupted. A leader of the synagogue comes running to him. His daughter has died. All of a sudden everything is urgent. Everything is desperate. Jesus gets up and goes. And then, in the middle of that emergency, he is interrupted again. A woman appears in the crowd. Matthew doesn't tell us much about her, but Mark and Luke do. For twelve years she has been bleeding. Twelve years. Twelve years of doctors. Twelve years of disappointment. Twelve years of spending money she doesn't have. Twelve years of being told she is unclean. Twelve years of isolation. Twelve years of carrying something she never asked for. And somehow, somehow, after all of that, she still believes one thing. She believes that Jesus might be different. "If I can only touch the hem of his garment." That's all she wants. Not a conversation. Not a sermon. Not a theological debate. Just one touch. One moment. One connection. If I can only touch the hem of his garment. And what strikes me every time I hear this story is that before there is healing, there is courage. Before there is a miracle, there is hope. After twelve years of rejection, she still reaches. After twelve years of disappointment, she still reaches. After twelve years of hearing, "You doesn't belong here," she still reaches. Maybe that's the first miracle. The courage to believe that God has not abandoned her. The courage to believe that Jesus might actually receive her. The courage to hope one more time. And when she touches him, Jesus does something beautiful. He doesn't recoil. He doesn't shame her. He doesn't lecture her. He doesn't move away. He turns toward her. Jesus says, "Take heart daughter." Daughter. Not problem. Not burden. Not outcast. Daughter.

And I wonder if that might be one of the deepest truths in the entire Gospel. Jesus does not move away. Let's look at the whole passage. The tax collectors come close. Jesus doesn't move away. The sinners come close. Jesus doesn't move away. Matthew comes close. Jesus doesn't move away. The bleeding woman comes close. Jesus doesn't move away. A dead girl's father comes close. Jesus doesn't move away. Over and over and over again, people reach toward Jesus, and Jesus remains present. And I think that's very good news because we live in a world that teaches us the opposite. People move away all the time. Relationships break. Families become estranged. Friendships end. Churches sometimes wound people. Communities sometimes fail people. Powers and principalities corrupt. And sometimes, oftentimes, we even abandon ourselves. We numb ourselves. We stop hoping. We stop reaching. We decide that disappointment is safer than hope. But I cannot find a single place in the Gospels where Jesus abandons people who reach for him. Not one. Even hanging on the cross. Even there. Still forgiving. Still loving. Still reaching. Still present.

Marsha P. Johnson has been on my heart and mind lately. Some of you may know that name. Some of you may not. Marsha P. Johnson was a Black transgender activist, a veteran of the 1969 Stonewall riots, and someone who lived much of her life on the margins of society. She was frequently unhoused. She struggled with mental illness. She was often mocked. Often dismissed. But she was grand. And if you've ever wondered what the P stood for, Marsha P. Johnson had an answer. The P stood for "Pay It No Mind." And in that answer, you can hear her joy. Her spirit. She wasn't simply a symbol. She was a person. A beloved child of God. Marsha P. Johnson once said this: "I got married to Jesus Christ when I was sixteen years old, still in high school. He's the only man I can really trust. He helps me out in my hours of need and listens to all my problems and never laughs at me. He takes me very seriously." That quote stops me every time. Not just because Marsha P. Johnson loved Jesus. What moves me is that after everything she experienced, she still believed Jesus took her seriously. "He listens to all my problems and never laughs at me." The woman in today's Gospel believed Jesus would be different. Marsha P. Johnson believed Jesus would be different. And both of them, in their own ways, reached for the hem of his garment. Marsha's story is about every person who has ever wondered whether they still belong. It's about every person who has ever thought: If people knew the whole truth about me...If they knew everything...Would they still want me? It's about the recovering addict. The grieving parent. The desperate teenager. The person carrying shame and fear and regret. The person who feels forgotten and who has almost stopped hoping. It's about all of us. Every single one of us. And maybe that's why the woman reaches for Jesus. Not because she's certain. But because some part of her still believes she might be welcomed. Some part of her still believes she might be loved. And maybe that's what faith looks like. Not certainty. Reaching.

I've been thinking a lot this week about my grandmother Grace Hatch. Her husband, my grandfather was an AME Zion pastor and presiding elder for over fifty years. And my grandmother used to tease all eight of her grandchildren. She would say, "Eight grandchildren, and not one of you became a preacher." And then we'd all laugh and laugh and laugh. My grandmother died in 1996. But I've seen her face all this week. I can see her smiling. Reaching. And I imagine she's laughing too. And maybe that's the story of the church. Generation after generation. Saint after saint. One person after another after another after another, reaching for Jesus. Matthew the tax collector. The woman who touched the hem of his garment. Marsha P. Johnson. My grandmother Grace. The addict. The grieving parent. The desperate teenager. All the saints whose names we'll never know. You and me. All reaching. All hoping. All daring to believe that Jesus might receive us.

The trans poet Jay Hulme wrote a poem called *Jesus at the gay bar*. In the middle of the poem a young man reaches for Jesus, just as the woman reached for Jesus, just as we reach for Jesus. And Jesus does something unexpected because that's what Jesus does. I want to leave you with his words:

He's here in the midst of it —
right here at the center of the dance floor,
robes hitched up to His knees
to make it easy to spin.

At some point in the evening
a boy will touch the hem of His robe
and beg to be healed, beg to be
anything other than this;

and He will reach His arms out,
sweat-damp, and weary from dance.
He'll cup this boy's face in His hand
and say,

my beautiful child
there is nothing in this heart of yours
that ever needs to be healed.