Matthew 9:9-13 March 11, 2018

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

*The Forgiveness of Jesus, Part 4*

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As we begin week 4 of our Lenten series, *The Forgiveness of Jesus*, I invite you to look at the words on the window sills. These have been our words of the week: Repent (of your sins). Receive (God’s forgiveness). Refocus (on spiritual health & wholeness). Today our word of week is Reach.

To reach is to make a stretch with, as if with one's hand. As a short person, there are a lot of things above my head that I can’t reach without help of some sort. I either have to call for help from someone taller, or I have to get a chair or a stool to stand on. To reach is to stretch in order to get hold of something. It takes effort and it takes intention and sometimes it takes others. Reach is our word of the week. Let us pray:

*Father God, thank you for sending Jesus as your way of reaching us – your way of rescuing us. We have so much to learn, and so much we need to leave behind in order to reach in the ways you call us to reach. Help us to truly hear your word now, to allow ourselves to be stretched beyond our daily patterns for your sake and the sake of those around us who need to know God’s love for them. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

The introductory section of the video our small groups are watching is a video about the Western Wall (also called the Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem. Herod the Great constructed the oldest layers of the wall 19-20 years before the birth of Jesus as the second Jewish temple was being remodeled. Today the Wall is a destination point for pilgrimage and prayer for Jews. At least seventeen layers of the Wall are below the street level, but the massive lower stones of the visible portion date to the time of Herod. These colossal limestone stones, each weighing between one and eight tons, were crafted with masterly precision so that they fit perfectly against each other without mortar. Some of the joints, however, have eroded, and Orthodox Jews fill many of the chinks in the lower blocks with written prayers. On a daily basis, many Jews gather at the wall to pray.

But the Jews are not the only people who visit the Wall. Travelers from all over the world go to the Wall to put their prayers in the chinks between the stones. When we were there in 1999, we put some special prayers in that amazing history-filled wall. But there is something there that might seem unusual to us. You can see behind me in the picture some posts with chains. In 1999 that is what was used to keep women on one side and men on the other side as they visited the Wall. Now there is an actual wall between the sections. How ironic that there is a dividing wall that divides the Wall, that divides people, one from the other.



Our Scripture for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew 9:9-13. Let’s read it from the NRSV: ***9****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.* ***10****And as he sat at dinner[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%209&version=NRSV;MSG#fen-NRSV-23390a)*] in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%209&version=NRSV;MSG#fen-NRSV-23390b)*] with him and his disciples.****11****When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”****12****But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.****13****Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”*

I just can’t go on without also reading this from The Message:***9****Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” Matthew stood up and followed him.* ***10-11****Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew’s house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus’ followers. “What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?”* ***12-13****Jesus, overhearing, shot back, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”*

It’s easy for us ‘church people’ to get to the place where we are thinking mostly of what we want from our church instead of what we, as the church, can give to the world. For example, it doesn’t take long for us to pick our spot in the pews. It’s not that we *have* to sit in that spot, but it’s where we gravitate towards when we come. Some of us even put our coat or pocketbook in that place to “reserve it” while we go somewhere else in the building. Some of you remember that at one time only some of the pews had cushions on them – cushions that had been purchased by a family or an individual for “their” pew and their family. It’s not that there was malicious intent in doing this, it just happened. “Hey, if you want a cushion, get a cushion.” But when an outsider came in, the message this sent was “Don’t sit there, that cushion and therefore that pew belongs to someone and that someone is not you.” Not a great welcoming message! So, one of the first big changes we made together as pastor and people was to put matching cushions on all the pews. The message this sent to us within the church family was that everyone is equal in the sight of God – though not one us of deserves God’s amazing grace, we all can receive it. Though not one of us deserves a tush cushion, no matter where you choose to sit, we all can have one. The message this new uniformity sends to visitors is “You are welcome to sit anywhere you want. We’re glad you’re here.” It was a visual, practical lesson in ecclesiology & hospitality.

The Bible teaches us that the congregation, the church family is our training ground for discipleship, for living & ministering like Jesus in the world. The things we do and the way we do them together, as a team, as the family of God are important. The mission of discipleship training is part of why we do things by committees and by boards. Doing things together, praying about them, discussing them, including discussing our different opinions about them, and looking at what the Bible might say about them teaches us in very practical ways how to live & work unified in Christ. We are called to honor others above ourselves, serve one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, help one another, … you get the point. And as we learn how to do that here within the church family with people who are different than we are, we then take that training out to the world. We are called to Reach out to all people within our sphere of influence - allowing ourselves to be stretched in our faith to move towards people whose lives, whose opinions, whose bias, whose morals and values, whose beliefs might be as different from ours as day is different from night.

We are going to watch two short videos now prepared for us by our missionaries Juan & Shirley Ocasio. Juan & Shirley made the move to Lithuania in December after serving in the country of Georgia for 12 years with their daughters Ellah & Ayanna. Lithuania is a country filled with people very different than Juan & Shirley & their girls. Lithuania is filled with people who don’t know Jesus. At the Operation Christmas Child Regional Connect Conference in Baltimore that Chris Walters and I attended on Friday at the invitation of John & Ruth Mitchell, Lithuanians were highlighted on a map as one of 37 unreached people groups. God called the Ocasio family from their home in Pennsylvania to reach into the lives of the people of Lithuania, and he has called us to support them in whatever way he leads. *Show Videos.*

Unless you’ve been a missionary and have had to raise your salary, have had to depend solely on donations in order to live, pay your bills, and minister, we don’t know what a stressor this can be, what a distraction it can be from the task at hand. Juan & Shirley’s move came with an additional price-tag of approximately $25,000 which they hope to raise in the next 18 months. That amount includes moving expenses, school fees for the girls, full-time language school for Juan & Shirley, and start-up costs for the new church plant Journey Church. On Easter Sunday we will divide the offering from both services, both loose cash, coin, and checks and envelope giving, between the Ocasio’s and another missionary who will be with us next Sunday in both services.

At the beginning of the Scripture for today from Matthew 9, we read how, as Jesus was walking along, he saw Matthew. There’s that word again! He didn’t just see a reviled tax collector. He didn’t just see a thief as so many others did. He didn’t see an outsider. He saw a man whose name was Matthew, who needed to know the love that God had for him – and he reached out.

Maybe we aren’t called to Lithuania, but we are still called to be missionaries, folks. We are God’s missionaries to the people around us: neighbors, fellow students, family members, co-workers, people at the store, at the restaurant, people who make deliveries that we might encounter for 3 minutes, people at the doctor’s office or on our sports team – we need to see them, and ask God to help us overcome our fear, our judgement, our prejudice, our apathy, our backward shyness – and become bold, determined, compassionate, and merciful disciples who reach out to everyone and anyone with the love of Jesus.

Let us pray: *Thank you, precious Lord, for bringing us into your family. Thank you that through Christ, we are not strangers to each other. We belong here. We belong to one another through the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Forgive us when we have put barriers up between us for any reason. Forgive us for not celebrating the bountiful treasure we have here in one another. Forgive us for not welcoming the stranger as we should, or inviting the different. Forgive us for creating walls that keep people out that are not walls of your making. Forgive us for not reaching out to one another and to others you see…. How we need to hear from you, draw close to you, and be filled anew by your Spirit as we remember all you have given for us. As we come to your Table today, we pray that the bread we break and the cup we pour may be for us a true communion of the broken body and the shed blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. As Christ prayed, may we be made one as he and the Father are one in and through this marvelous mystery at the table of the King. Through Christ and for his sake we pray, Amen.* Let us stand and sing:

Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away, slain for us - and we remember
The promise made that all who come in faith find forgiveness at the cross.
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice
As a sign of our bonds of peace around the table of the King.

The body of our Savior Jesus Christ, torn for you - eat and remember
The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life paid the price to make us one.
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice
As a sign of our bonds of love around the table of the King.

The blood that cleanses every stain of sin, shed for you - drink and remember
He drained death’s cup that all may enter in to receive the life of God.
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice
As a sign of our bonds of grace around the table of the King.

And so with thankfulness and faith we rise to respond, - and to remember
Our call to follow in the steps of Christ as His body here on earth.
As we share in his suffering, we proclaim Christ will come again!

And we’ll join in the feast of heaven around the table of the King.

(Getty Music)

After we share communion, during the offering, we will take slips of paper and write down names, or groups of people we know we hold at arm’s length – people we know that God calls us to reach with the good news of the gospel in Jesus’ name. We will take the slip of paper and stick them in the rocks at the foot of the cross – like the prayers stuck in the chinks at the Western Wall. May God take these prayers and bring forth a new harvest of compassion, of mercy, of welcome, of faith through us for the building of His Kingdom in and around us.