

*“Textual Harassment”*\* (Matt. 9:9-13, 18-26)  
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This morning’s lectionary reading contains three stories that are woven rather strangely together. The stories contain different characters who don’t really know each other, but are bound up in the same chapter of our Bibles. That chapter, Matthew 9, tells of Jesus crossing all sorts of boundaries to spend his time on the margins. It’s a shame that the three characters from the story don’t ever get to meet, since each of them might have something different to say about the rabbi, all of them in possession of a certain wisdom. So this morning, perhaps we could envision those three characters around a common table for just a moment. For if we could bring them all together, what would they say? If we could get past the author of the text, with his own agendas of plot and point, what would we find? If we could listen to the one man and the two women from the story, what liberating message might they offer? The only way to find out is to invite them in.

If we’re going to invite biblical characters around, then we should probably set for them something of a biblical table. Nothing too fancy, just a basket or two of bread, maybe, with a few small dishes of olives and figs to the side. A couple of decanters of wine and water would seem hospitable, so we could set those out for our guests. And just because they wouldn’t have seen one, we might bring a copy of the Bible itself for them to flip through. We could lay it on the end of the table and refer to it if necessary. The focus, of course, would not be on reading but on conversation. For the point of inviting these people, in our minds, is to remember that the conversation is meant to cross boundaries. It is meant to cross the boundaries of time and place, culture and context,

inviting us into an imaginative discussion where we can begin to hear things from a different perspective. And in order to hear things from a different perspective, we really must speak to all of the characters. Imagine it.

Sitting down with the three characters from the story, we might begin with a few introductions. “Hello Matthew,” we could say to the man, and then offer our own names, “I’m so and so.” And no sooner would we do that than he might look back at us warily and ask, “How did you know my name?” “It’s in our sacred stories,” we’d tell him, and then we’d have to explain what the sacred stories are, how the Hebrew scriptures he would have known were later bound with stories of Jesus’ life to become the Christian Bible, the holy writ of Jesus’ followers. “My name is in that book?” Matthew might gasp, swallowing his bread hard to keep from choking. “Yeah, you’re in there. Want some more bread?” And while Matthew quietly shakes his head to say “No thanks,” we can move on and introduce ourselves to the next guest. She is the woman who the story says came to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. But we don’t know her name. So we would have to say, “I’m so and so...and what is your name?”

The question itself should embarrass us. For the question plainly reveals one of the strongest biases in our sacred stories, a bias that favors men over women and reflects the patriarchal culture of the ancient writers. The old gospel writers simply don’t think twice about naming the male characters as subjects – Matthew, Jesus – and simply describing the female characters as objects – the woman who this, the girl who that. But we think twice about it and so it would be with a sense of sadness that we would hear the woman at the table ask, “You knew Matthew’s name but not my name...is my name not in your book?” “No, it isn’t,” we’d have to say. “It is one of the things we need to know that

isn't in the book. We need to know what your name is. Can you tell us?" With that she likely would tell us and we should wonder about it even now. What was her name? I'll bet it was beautiful. Miriam, maybe. Or Sophia. It could have been Marah, Phoebe, Ruth...who knows? What was her name? If she could tell us it might add something saving to our sacred stories, it might save her humanity, preserve her personhood, it might move her from object – that woman – to subject – our sister. In fact, if she told us her name, we might just reach for that Bible at the edge of the table and draw a pen from our pocket. Opening the book to Matthew 9, we could cross out the word "woman" and write her name in its place. Afterwards, we could introduce ourselves to the last guest, the young girl from the story, so that everyone at the table would finally know everyone else and we could enjoy the meal. In typical Covenant style we could begin by asking everyone to tell what they remember, to say how it was that they found the rabbi and what their experience meant to them. Going in order, we might start with Matthew.

Matthew would probably start by telling us a bit about his life as a tax collector. It wasn't an easy gig, he could tell us, and people tended not to like him so much. Perhaps after so many years of doing it he didn't like himself either because he was looking to make a change. He was in a strange place in life, that liminal space where a person is just about to tip over into the next thing, just waiting to see what it will be. And it was then that he heard the itinerant rabbi, heard him telling stories about the kingdom of heaven in the here and now. That appealed to him, you know, the kingdom of heaven in the here and now. So he quit what he was doing. He quit collecting taxes, he quit taking money for the government and he told them they could keep the job, give it to someone else.

The rabbi only had to invite him once, “Follow me,” and he was gone. Because he’d wanted to be gone for a long time.

Perhaps Matthew would tell us about his first days following along with the rabbi. He’d tell how they went all over and showed hospitality to the people they met, inviting everyone to their table to share bread. Then he might turn to us and ask if those stories made it into our book, our Bible. We could tell him that some of them did and he could continue, saying how he remembered the Pharisees and other religious people constantly asking Jesus questions. And Jesus, Matthew might tell, suggested that those religious people should go and learn what their books meant. Jesus thought they might spend some time thinking about real religion, religion that cares about all brothers and sisters and the world we share. We might agree with Matthew here, leafing through the Bible to read him, “[Jesus said to the Pharisees] Go and learn what this text means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” (v. 13) When Jesus said that, quoting from the prophet Hosea, it was to tell the most religious people he could find that they still had a lot to learn. Then he sat down again with those who weren’t so religious so they could eat together and talk things over.

This is a good image of Jesus to keep. And this image of Jesus sitting around the table with “sinners and tax collectors” is something that the liberal church has often pointed out, quick as we are to find those places in the sacred stories where everyone is made welcome. But there are other characters in the sacred stories who are never really at the table. One of those characters is the woman we’ve invited, the one who is sitting next to Matthew and whose name we have written into our Bibles. We could turn to her next and

ask what she remembers about the rabbi. Reaching for her glass of wine, she might take a sip before beginning her story.

When she met Jesus it was after many years of suffering a certain stigma. We know from the sacred story that she had been bleeding, hemorrhaging, and the story intends for us to know that the symptom is related to menstruation, although it does not say it. For the Bible, written as it was by men, ancient men to be precise, is not a book that knows anything at all about women's bodies or their health. And the menstrual cycle was clearly not understood by either the gospel writers or their Hebrew predecessors. In fact, the Hebrews had set up a great many purity laws to do with blood and the fear of being contaminated by it. According to the religious rituals devised by Hebrew men, women who were menstruating were considered to be unclean and were sent away from the community for a time. So they did not understand menstrual blood as the organic result of a very beautiful and natural process. No, the Hebrews thought that blood was dirty and would keep them from being clean. It is most significant then that the woman who was looking for Jesus had been bleeding for twelve years. Because for all those years she would have been at a distance from her community. And after so much time apart she was hoping to be healed – healed from the division, healed from the stigma, healed from pain heaped onto her by men who could never understand.

“When I heard the rabbi was coming,” she might say, “I thought that maybe he could help me. For the people said that he would eat with anyone and teach them in parables and listen to what they had to say.” She could tell us how, when she did draw near to the rabbi, she touched his robe and he noticed her. And instead of worrying about rituals or purity, instead of objectifying her as others had, Jesus called her daughter, and offered

her a blessing. “Take heart,” he said, “Your [own] faith has healed you,” (v. 22), which is another way of saying that what she needed most, she already had. She did not need to be made clean by someone else, by a man, she only needed to see that what was pure and what was beautiful was within herself. All the rabbi did was recognize her humanity, see her as a whole person. That’s all anyone needed to do.

As she tells the story, the woman might pause from time to time and stare into her glass of wine, finding herself reflected in its crimson surface. And during one of those interludes we might ask ourselves a few questions about the gender bias in the church. For while we have already picked up on the obvious prejudice that men in the sacred story are named and women are not, there is something much deeper that we may begin to hear, something that cuts to the quick of our tradition. If we cut to that quick, we’ll draw blood. And then the blood will draw something for us. The blood will draw a picture, a circle for us to look at. The woman from the story, viewed as she is as unclean, is kept on the outside of the circle, no place for her in the center. In the center, of course, there is a man, the figure of Jesus that the Christian church has taught is somehow redemptive. It’s a disturbing image that raises a number of questions. Why is it, we must ask, that the church has said that Jesus’ blood will save us while the woman’s blood will sully us? How is it that one drop of blood is transcendent and another drop is tainted? And what is being said by a church that places a bleeding man at the center of everything and sends a bleeding woman into the margins of exile?

The truth is that the only blood of life common to us all is blood that our mothers shed when they gave birth. That is the real blood, that is the physical stuff, that is the product of pleasure and pain and love and sacrifice without which none of us would be here. And

when the church distances itself from the real world and our physical experiences in order to hum spiritual tunes about some heavenly blood, then we can rightly ask if the church is in touch with reality. All of reality. Physical reality. Human reality. Male and female reality. If we began to ask these questions about reality with the woman at our table, she might be intrigued or even excited to hear them. Perhaps she would observe that it sounds as if we've made some progress in our thinking. She might even be curious enough to ask us how these questions have changed the church and what our current practices are concerning women like her. And here we can be embarrassed again. For while we could tell her of Covenant Church's honest inclusivity, we would also have to tell her a more general truth that the church continues in its repression of women. From the very top of its ranks, where women are so often not allowed to serve, all the way to the grassroots level, where churches infringe upon women's most basic rights to speak for themselves and exercise control over their own bodies, we would have to tell the woman that religion is still commonly used to keep so many people in their places. If we really thought about it, it might be enough to cause our voices to shake or bring us a few angry tears as we told the truth about the continuing inequality in the church.

Of course, all of the shaky voices and tears might remind the young girl of her story. When she came into contact with the rabbi, it was as one who had just come back from the brink of death, pulled out from that place by the touch of a human hand. Jesus healed her is all she might tell us, leaving us at a loss for how to interpret that – literally, figuratively, theologically? All she could say is that her father had gone to find Jesus and said to him, "Rabbi, save my daughter!" And he had come and had brought the girl out, freed her from whatever it was that she had been held by. "When I woke up," the girl

could say, “I knew that I was okay.” Then she might just reach across the table for the basket of bread and tear off a great big chunk, chewing it as unselfconsciously as only a child can. Watching her we might wonder about the possibility of dead things being brought to life and ask ourselves a final set of questions. What if the old rabbi’s movement of crossing boundaries and really seeing people could be breathed back to life? What if Matthew’s story of quitting everything and starting over could come true? What if the woman’s story of finally being welcomed as a whole person, a person with a name, could happen? What if the girl’s story of waking up and finding things okay could be realized? What if we began to take down all of the barriers that were put up so long ago, the barriers we have created in God’s name?

If we ever were able to share a meal with these biblical characters it would be difficult to wrap up the evening. We might conclude by thanking them all for coming and we might even pretend to usher them to the door, sending them off one at a time. We could follow Matthew out first, stopping on the sidewalk to wish him well and hope that we could do it again sometime. But then, once the man was gone, we might return to the dining room to find the woman and girl still there...and we might just ask them to stay a bit longer. In fact, we might ask them to stay a lot longer. We might ask them to tell us what they know, things our sacred stories do not always include. And we might open our Bibles once again, reach for our pens and start making notes. Because the conversation that the sacred stories began is meant to cross boundaries, it is intended to help us hear things from a different perspective. And with that in mind we might simply listen to all of those who have not been named, all of those who have not been celebrated, all of those who have been told to wait in the margins – our mothers our sisters our daughters – our

lovers our nurturers our friends – our priestesses and our prophets. And once we begin to hear from them, from all of them, then perhaps we can find the faith that Jesus said the woman had – the faith that will make us well.

Amen.

(\*The term “textual harassment” was coined by Mary Jacobus. In his volume, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, Peter Gomes notes that Jacobus first employed the “wickedly delicious concept of ‘textual harassment’” in an article from 1982 entitled, “Is There a Woman in This Text?” which appeared in the journal *New Literary History*.)