

The Extraordinary Ordinary

Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

St. James Presbyterian Church, June 7, 2026

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Today begins a new season in the church year. It is known by the exciting name of Ordinary Time. To be completely accurate, we had a brief bout of Ordinary Time between Epiphany on January 6 and Ash Wednesday. But now at last Ordinary Time begins again in earnest, stretching all through summer and autumn until the very end of November. That's a long time. And since it *is* such a long time, I thought that we might begin by reflecting on what it's all about.

One thing that our turn to Ordinary Time means is that the party's over. We've had a lot of celebrations over the last months: Advent and Christmas and Epiphany; Lent and Easter; Ascension and Pentecost; and just last week Trinity. But now there are no celebrations for many months. We might think of this long middle section of the liturgical year as the Peoria Time of year. Peoria, Illinois, near where I grew up, used to be thought of as the geographical centre of the United States. It's not, but it'll do, because Peoria is famous not for being exciting and "with it," but for being dull and drab and middle-of-the-road: just ordinary, and not in a good way. (The east-west centre of Canada, by the way, is in a rural community in Manitoba; the true geographical centre of Canada is apparently in an uninhabited area of Nunavut. But for our purposes, Peoria Time will do.)

Ordinary time in the church, however, is not just drab and dull and boring. For us, the word "ordinary" means "ordered" or "arranged" — in the way that the ordinal numbers are arranged. In the church, ordinary time is that season, that succession of days, when Jesus walks among us, entering into the — yes — ordinary courses of human life.¹ In the middle of the year, Jesus comes walking into the midst of our mortal and human lives. When he does, he transforms our lives and opens up our possibilities. In him and through him, the ordinary becomes extraordinary indeed.

Our reading from the Gospel according to St. Matthew this morning opens shortly after Jesus has delivered his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has come

¹ During these weeks, the Church focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ — "setting the stage for transformation and growth," per an on-line Catholic encyclopedia.

down from the mountain, and he has begun to heal, to teach, and to perform miracles among the people. Our reading is made up of four stories, and in each of them Jesus reaches across boundaries to bring new possibilities and new life to people in need.

First are two stories concerning tax collectors, beginning with Matthew. I have to tell you, I have been reading a lot about tax collectors over the last week! Tax collectors in Galilee and Judea in Jesus's day were not highly regarded. They were Jewish collaborators who squeezed their own people on behalf of the imperial regime, and who often squeezed them extra hard in order to line their own pockets. Tax collectors were banned from the synagogue; they were forbidden to testify in court because it was assumed they were liars. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself cites them as people from whom you can't expect much good behaviour. Yet Jesus calls Matthew in the same way he called Simon and Andrew and James and John. "Follow me," Jesus says. We don't really know why. Tax collecting, after all, is a lot different than fishing. But even so, like Simon and Andrew and James and John before him, Matthew responds. He gets up, and he follows.

The second story is like an amplification or a magnification of the first. Now, instead of a single tax collector, there are *many* tax collectors. And they aren't only following Jesus; they are eating with him, in Jesus's own home (or so it seems), and alongside his called disciples. No wonder the Pharisees are surprised; not to say shocked! The Pharisees, as we all know, are the rule-keepers, or more precisely the law-keepers. Here at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, their lack of understanding and grace have not yet hardened into the firm opposition that came later. In some ways, as one scholar points out, they are right to be concerned about the law, because keeping the law was what enabled the people to maintain a relationship with God. But here their faithfulness to the law blinds them to the blinding grace that Jesus is offering. Jesus is not affirming the tax collectors and "sinners" in their bad ways. He is transforming them.

The third and the fourth stories also go together. Matthew doesn't say what kind of leader the man is who kneels before Jesus. He is a person of status who humbles himself because of both his desperation and his faith. His little daughter has died, but he is convinced that Jesus will still be able to save her. In the midst of the journey to this man's house, Jesus is interrupted by a woman of

no status who is also desperate. Her affliction would have made her “unclean” and therefore an outcast. Yet she too has extraordinary faith in Jesus, for she believes that she will be cured if only she can touch the hem of his garment. She touches his cloak; Jesus turns. It is not the touch itself but the acknowledgement and words that it brings that do cure her; she is indeed made well.

In this pair of stories too there is an amplification, a magnification, as Jesus arrives at the home of the leader. The laughing mourning crowd creates one kind of magnification, for like the Pharisees they question Jesus’s intentions. Like the Pharisees, they resist the grace and mercy that Jesus intends to show; they create conflict. In addition, their involvement catapults Jesus’s actions from the private to the public realm. Unwittingly, they become witnesses. “The little girl is not dead but sleeping,” Jesus tells them, and because he says it, it is so. And how much more than healing the afflicted woman, whose life blood has been flowing away for twelve long years, is lifting a little girl from death itself.

All of these stories involve touching the untouchable. In each of them, Jesus crosses boundaries to bring healing, community, and new life. Tax collectors were beyond the pale, cast out of the community because of their own scurrilous behaviour. Yet Jesus calls Matthew; he opens his table hospitality to Matthew’s brethren. A woman who is bleeding and unclean is cast out of the community for fear that she contaminate others. By touching Jesus’s cloak, she risks contaminating him too. Yet he heals her, and calls her daughter. The bodies of the dead were also considered unclean and untouchable. Yet Jesus takes the dead girl by the hand and lifts her back to life.

In each of these stories too, the healing that takes place is more than the healing of physical afflictions. When Jesus calls Matthew and Matthew follows, Jesus is wresting him away from the oppressive empire that he has served and showing him a new kingdom, the kingdom of heaven breaking into our world. The tax collectors and sinners who eat with Jesus and his disciples have been transformed. Jesus does not leave them in their guilt and their shame, but in his great mercy brings them into new life and new community. Matthew, someone has pointed out, is as much in need of healing as the afflicted woman; to my mind, the converted tax collectors sitting with Jesus and his disciples at table is as much a miracle as raising the little girl from the dead.

As for the afflicted woman, when her body is made well, her life really is restored to her. “Daughter,” Jesus calls her, restoring to her, her identity as a member of the community, a daughter of Israel, a person who has a place and a purpose. As for the little girl, when Jesus helps her up from the sleep of death, he is giving a foretaste of his own resurrection, and providing us with a sign of his own identity as lord of redemption, deliverance, and resurrection.

Who might we be in this story? Are we like the afflicted woman, carrying a 12-year-burden and reaching out for release? Are we, like the tax collector, benefiting from oppressive societal structures, but ready to answer a call anyway? Or are we today like that dead girl, in a dark night of the soul. If we are, “as hard as it may be, can we trust that others are seeking Jesus on [our] behalf, and that Jesus has the power to revive?”²

If Jesus can convert Matthew, bring tax collectors and sinners to sit alongside disciples, heal and affirm an outcast woman, and lift a little girl from death; if status and illness and shame and popular opinion and the skepticism of the authorities are not barriers to him, then how can we not feel that, whoever we are, whatever worries or guilt or fears or weakness we carry, he will come for us.

Like Moses before him, Jesus came down from the mountain and stepped into the complicated, difficult, ordinary lives of God’s people. He came bringing not Law but Mercy. How can we not take heart at the breaking-in of God’s extraordinary grace and love? Thanks be to God. Amen.

² As phrased by Danny Zacharias, Acadia University.