

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, WA

“CHURCH: Hospital for Sinners”

Matthew 9:9-13

Jesus is not afraid to get in our business.

It was day like any other day for Matthew, sitting out in his booth, the smell of the dusty road in the air, the low sun gleaming in his eyes. The morning had been busy. April 15 was just around the corner, and tax season was in full force. The piles of coins and the accounting sheets lay before him. If he could just power through these last ten entries, he'd hit that perfect time to walk home: not yet pitch dark, but that nice duskiness of late evening—a duskiness that would conveniently hide him from the gaze of his neighbors.

Before he had found that perfect hour, Matthew had dreaded the walk home. He knew the looks he would get. The looks he deserved. He knew what they thought: Race traitor. Makin' a buck for the Man on the backs of his own countrymen. But you know what? Someone had to do it. Someone had to collect the taxes. The job had to get done. It's not like the Romans were going to go away

tomorrow. And he did a good job at it. He showed up on time. (More than you could say about smug, self-righteous Phineas down the street). No, Matthew worked hard. Speaking of which, if this last column would just balance already... “FOLLOW ME.”

Just like that Jesus comes into our lives.

FOLLOW ME.

Just like that Jesus interrupts the voice that chatters away inside of us all day long.

FOLLOW ME.

Just like that a sinner is called.

Jesus doesn't kick down the doors and come blazing in, but he also doesn't skirt around the issue. Jesus simply says, “I am coming to your house today. I am going to enter into the intimate space of your life—and I'm not even give you time to tidy the counters.” The thing about Jesus is that he isn't interested in perfect

people. Thank GOD Jesus isn't interested in perfect people. What Jesus IS interested in is us. Not us as the perfect people we'd be in three years after we'd lost those ten pounds or finally learned a foreign language or stopped snapping at our spouse. But the ruffled, squishy, crabby us of today. A future you isn't actually a real you yet—and Jesus is all about the people standing in front of him. The *real* people.

Jesus is simply much more realistic than we are. We're always hoping to arrive at some perfect state. But Jesus just wants *us*. And he's not content to wait around for the perfect us. Cause lets face it—that'd be a long wait with no end.

If the thing about Jesus is that he's not interested in perfect people, the thing about us humans is that we love to hide. Like Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit in the garden, we hide from God. We hide from the one who loves us because we're ashamed. We even hide over stupid things. I can remember as the strange four year old I was, taking handfuls of our dog's dogfood and hiding behind the bushes in our front yard to eat it. I didn't know why it was bad but I obviously knew I

wasn't supposed to. We humans are hiding creatures.

We hide because we don't want to be caught. But we also hide because we think we can figure the stickiness inside of ourselves **by** ourselves. We hold our problems close, thinking that maybe we can just solve it on our own. Maybe with a little bit more time, we can clean ourselves up and then no one will have to know.

But here's the thing. The longer we try to scoot out of sight of the God who wants to heal us, the worse it gets!

In the Harry Potter book series, one of my favorite scenes is when one of the kids gets a "howler" from his mom. A "howler" is a letter that when you open it, it howls. It's like one of those singing birthday cards you can get at the grocery store, but instead of some nice birthday sentiment you get a furious scolding from your momma over that paint you spilled on her brand new carpet and didn't tell her about. Howlers also have a unique characteristic: the longer you wait to open them, the louder they get. If you open it up right when you get it, your whole

house will be able to hear it. But if you stuff it under your bed and ignore it for a day, when you finally open that thing up, the whole *neighborhood* will hear it.

That's what happens with our sin. The longer we shove it under our beds, the longer we try to ignore it, to pretend it isn't there, the louder it gets, the more room it takes up in our lives.

But God has given us a gift called the church. The church is simply the people who are gathered around Jesus, willing to open up their "howlers" and face the consequences.

I love what the word church means in Greek. It means the ones who **are called out**. It doesn't mean the perfect people. It doesn't mean the sweet, pious people who always had the answer in class and never went to the principal's office. It just means the people Jesus has called on the carpet. The people whose dirty laundry is hanging out there for everyone to see.

The church is the place where you can tell the truth about yourself. The church is the place where you can

open that letter because God's mercy goes before you and behind you and above you and below you. We don't have to hide anymore because Jesus has forgiven us. We don't have to stick our heads in the sand any longer about the fact that we *are* sinners. When we hide from God and ourselves, it's like a balloon like blowing up tighter and tighter, hotter and hotter. But when we see the grace that God has given us in Jesus, when we see that we are forgiven, it's like all the hot air goes out of the balloon. The tightness, the breaking point of our lives, deflates.

When you're willing to look at the wounds of life—the wounds you have and the wounds you've given—there's a chance to be healed.

The church isn't a special group of people, somehow mystically holier than other people. The church is simply the group of people who are asking Jesus to heal them.

The church is sort of like Mary with her knee surgery. Did Mary want the pain of that knee surgery? No! But does she now have 110 degree range of motion because of it? Yes! The church is the group of people who are saying to the surgeon, "I know

this is going to hurt, but I want the surgery. I want to get better.” The church is the ones who know that the surgeon is the God we know in Jesus. The church is the hospital for all of us who say Amen when we hear the verse “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

You know maybe as we talk about the church, we should talk about what church is the *right* church. Which denomination is really getting it right? Which church is THE church? Is it the Presbyterian church? Is it the Assemblies of God church? Is it the Catholic church? Well, we all here know it’s obviously the American Baptist church 😊 Now here’s the true answer: The true answer is that the right church is the church that heals sinners. The right church, the righteous church, the church that is in line with what Jesus is up to in the world is simply a bunch of people whose own wounds have been wrapped up out there wrapping up other people’s wounds.

I loved how Pope Francis spoke about the “right” church a few years ago. He said, “I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is

useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds...”¹

You know what heals? Baptism heals. And the Lord’s Supper heals. Baptism and communion are God’s medicine for sinners. You don’t get to take the little wafer and cup of juice because you scored an A+ on your God quiz. It’s not a reward for good behavior. It’s the medicine we need to get better so that we might actually be able to behave better.

I think the Sonjo people in Kenya knew what it meant to get communion’s medicine and have that medicine heal them. The Sonjo people were well-known for their dancing, but when they became Christians things started to change. One missionary tells this tale. “They brought their music directly to the place where the bread and wine were later to be blessed, and performed it

¹ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” in America, the National Catholic Review. September 30, 2013. <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

there very deliberately and carefully. Some of their music was decidedly secular. The elders in that community pointed out to me that the purpose of such a procedure was to make an actual judgment on a very important area of their lives. The time of [communion] was the time for that judgment. They were not ashamed of that particular dance in their own lives, so they wanted that part of their lives to be offered with the [Lord's Supper]. There were some dances they were ashamed to bring into [communion]. By that very fact, a judgment had been made on them. Such dances should no longer be part of their lives at all. [Communion] served as a judgment for them.”²

Our judgment is our healing. God calling us out for all of the ways we've gone wrong is God's love.

And so much has gone wrong hasn't it? If ever there was a time for healing the wounds it's this week. Alton Sterling shot and killed in Baton Rouge. Philando Castile shot and killed in Minnesota. Five police officers shot and killed in Dallas.

And wasn't it just last week we were praying for the fifty killed in Orlando? It's been a hell of a month. People are wounded out there, church. People are wounded and we're supposed to be ones with Gilead's balm. We have got to find healing ourselves, we have got to keep on opening our own howlers and finding God's grace, because we can't heal unless we know the true healer personally.

So I want us to take a moment right now. Just thirty seconds where we are silent. Thirty seconds where we give the Great Physician some room to work. In the silence, I want you to ask Jesus, where do you want to heal me? I'll time it. {Take a few seconds of silence}

Church we have the medicine. The medicine is Jesus. The Jesus who we become companions with in baptism and communion. The Jesus whose mission was to seek and save the lost. We cannot ignore so great a healing.

So church, hospital of sinners and for sinners, heal the wounds, heal the wounds.

² Vincent Donovan, "Christianity Rediscovered," 94.