

Over a hundred years ago, humorist Finley Peter Dunne, whose newspaper columns appeared under the name Mr. Dooley, wrote that it was the responsibility of journalists to use their reporting to *comfort the afflicted but afflict the comfortable*. And because we will take inspiration from just about anywhere, preachers quickly appropriated that phrase to describe the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel, which literally means *good news*, can both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and still be called good news for everyone, if we remember that when scripture says “you” it usually refers not to one individual but to the whole community; *you all*, or as my Hebrew professors from South Carolina and Texas taught us to translate it, *y’all*. God cares for the whole human family and the entirety of creation, which means that sometimes scripture corrects the harm that these people do to those people, afflicting the comfortable in order for the afflicted to find comfort. That sounds great when we think we are the afflicted ones...not so much when we realize that we’re pretty comfortable. Yet we accept scripture’s reprimand because we understand that God’s kingdom is one big community, that we are all part of one body. Or as John Donne said:

*No man is an island, / Entire of itself. / Each is a piece of the continent, / A part of the main.  
Each man's death diminishes me, / For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know / For whom the bell tolls, / It tolls for thee.*

All this is by way of saying that as we leave the festive liturgical season and return to Matthew’s narrative of Jesus’ everyday life and especially of Jesus’ parables, we ought to consider carefully where we see ourselves in these stories. Certainly there are passages where we receive the comfort of the gospel, but if we never walk away from scripture chastened or convicted, we’ve only heard half the message. God did not give us the law, the prophets, and God’s own incarnate self so that we could remain comfortable and complacent and never grow in grace.

In today’s reading, Jesus recruits Matthew from the tax office to become a disciple, then sits down to dinner with a houseful of tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees ask the disciples why Jesus is willing to eat with society’s most undesirable people, but either because the disciples don’t have an answer or because Jesus beats them to it, it’s Jesus who challenges the Pharisees: *Why don’t you go read the scriptures you claim to follow? Scripture says ‘I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.’* Of all the prophets who spoke similar words, Jesus chose Hosea, whom God had instructed not just to eat with sinners but to marry one. Jesus explains that he has not come for the healthy but the sick, not for the righteous but sinners.

So, where do we see ourselves in this story? It’s pure comfort if we see ourselves as the tax collectors and sinners, *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...* and all that, but do we really think of ourselves that way? In first century Roman occupied Palestine, tax

collectors were the worst of the worst—selling out their neighbors, collaborating with the oppressive government, making their living from further exploiting an already exploited people. Think of predatory pay day lenders, or health insurance administrators who deny claims for life-saving care, or agents who ambush asylum seekers outside the hearings to legalize their immigration status, or the trafficker or drug dealer. Don't most of us see ourselves as having room to improve but being nowhere near as bad as *those* people? So let's assume that's who was dining with Jesus. *Really, Jesus?* Honestly, I don't think he should be breaking bread with those people either.

If we aren't going to claim our place among the truly awful sinners, then maybe we identify more with the Pharisees. The gospels so often portray Jesus debating with the Pharisees, and Jesus is the hero of the story, so we don't like to think of ourselves in the role of Pharisee. Plus we are taught that none of us can perfectly keep the law, so we get a little judgment about the Pharisees' presumed self-righteousness. But to Matthew and his ancient Jewish community, the Pharisees were the good guys, or at least the guys who were trying their hardest to be good...kind of like how we think of ourselves as doing the best we can to follow God's call. Jesus doesn't tell the Pharisees that they're bad guys, but he does challenge them to be more merciful. As the hymn of the day, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy* puts it, *We make this love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify it's strictness with a zeal God will not own.* Most of us draw a line somewhere between us and those who don't deserve God's mercy, but that's a line we draw, not a line that God draws. We need to hear again and again Jesus' instruction to the Pharisees: *Go learn what the Bible really means when it says, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*

There is one more place we may find ourselves in this story: somewhere between the worst of sinners and the best of Pharisees were the disciples, who were doing, or at least watching, what Jesus did, but who were not very brave, or at least not very quick, to stand up for Jesus and his radical mercy. In this world that so often divides us into factions and bullies us into taking sides, it is hard to echo the gospel's claim that God so loved *the world*...and not just a select few people. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are required by the congregation's constitution to proclaim God's love for the world and advocate for dignity, justice, and equity for *all* people...and that's probably the thing that we're given the most grief for doing. But silence hardly ever helps bring comfort to the afflicted as opposed to maintaining the comfort of the ones doing the afflicting. We are all called to speak up.

Wherever we may see ourselves in this story—egregious sinner, self-righteous believer, or reticent disciple—the One we are called to follow is Jesus: Jesus who invited unlikely disciples, Jesus who sat and ate with the despised, Jesus who found mercy in the law, Jesus who got up and left the debate about who was worthy to go raise the dead, healing and finding faith along the way. Jesus has grace enough for everyone; do we?