

Needing A Physician

A Sermon by Rev Frank Rose

When the fishermen worked in the waters of the Sea of Galilee and brought their catches to land, they knew that they would have to deal with tax collectors; after all, they were in occupied country. At the crossroad of the main roads leading from north through the land of Canaan, down into Egypt and everywhere around them, they saw reminders of Roman authority--the Roman power. They had very negative feelings about these tax collectors. In the first place, they were collaborators, Jewish people who had gone over to serve the Roman authorities and that by itself made them outcasts and undesirable. But the other thing is that the Romans had a system whereby the tax collector would collect for Rome and for himself and the Romans were only concerned about what they got and it was up to the tax collector to take whatever he wanted above that. So the people always had this sense that the tax collectors were taking too much, that they were growing wealthy at the expense of these simple fishermen and traders in the town and villages along the coast of Galilee, and they lived an opulent life style--they were wealthy people. It's no wonder that in the Jewish community life tax collectors were ostracized--they were not allowed to attend the Synagogue--they were not allowed to hold certain positions of authority. Their social life had to be mostly with people like themselves--with foreigners--with strangers and societies outcasts--the sinners--the derelicts.

Imagine what it was like for the disciples, who had been fishermen and who found that they had been called to leave their nets to follow Jesus, but also a certain Levi, sitting at his custom booth, had been called. Now they would be working, side by side, with a man toward whom they had such negative feelings. They had now become partners with a Publican. And nothing is said in the gospels about that particular adjustment because the focus is on an even more challenging thing and that was the attitude of the Pharisees.

Now the Pharisees were good people. They were upright and law-abiding people. They knew the law and tried very hard to follow that law and it was very difficult for them to see Jesus calling simple, ordinary folk to become disciples and then selecting a man who was a publican, a tax collector. And then they watched in amazement as Levi, who was later called Matthew, invited his friends and Jesus to a feast to celebrate

the fact that he had become a disciple. That house was full of people who had normally been rejected by society, so the Pharisees looked and murmured and talked to the other disciples and said, "Why does your master eat with Publicans and sinners?"

From their point of view they thought that the Messiah was going to come to save the nation--to deliver them from foreign domination--to make them a free and strong country once again and to avenge them of the harm done to them by the Egyptians, by the Assyrians, by the Babylonians, by the Greeks, by the Romans, by one nation after another. So they thought of the Messiah as being the "National Deliverer", the one who would save the nation. And they had no conscious sense that they needed to be saved from anything. But here was a despised and rejected person, Levi, the tax collector and Jesus was eating at his house and associating with his friends. We find the familiar words in Luke 5:31 and 32, "Jesus answered and said to them, those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

In the course of our life we pass through the different phases represented by the people in the Word. A person who grows up with some sense of religious conscience, who tries to live a good life, a righteous life, might find it hard to see himself as a sinner. There was a young man who thought of himself in very good terms, who saw himself as being accepted by others as being a good, upstanding citizen and he didn't stop to reflect on the fact that he had a secret life of drug abuse. Only his very close friends knew that; and he always thought to himself, 'I can stop anytime I want to--I'm in control--the drugs are not in control.' Now, in that condition he was sick, but had no idea that he was sick.. In fact he would view himself as being very righteous. Of course, the Lord finds it difficult to talk to people in that condition. Until eventually things change and he had to look at the fact that his life was an utter mess and he could not control his drug abuse. And finally, on listening to someone talk, he really heard for the first time what prayer is all about, that in prayer we ask for things that we are powerless over ourselves--and the Lord really does answer prayer. So in his private prayer he finally admitted to the Lord, Lord, 'I'm sick--I need help' --and there was an instant change in his life just through that one confession--that one admission. And there were many things that followed to change that lifestyle and to find himself in a more orderly state; but that shock, that

recognition of need was extremely important to his further spiritual growth.

There is a young man described in the Old Testament. He was handsome--he was courageous--he was very capable in many areas. He became famous for slaying the giant Goliath and for his conquest against the Philistines and eventually he became the most popular and powerful king that Israel had known. This is King David. We remember David largely through the Psalms. I've noticed that when I've made hospital visits and ask people, "What would you like me to read to you?" they almost always ask for a Psalm--" Read me one of the Psalms". Now I remember as a young man finding it very difficult to know why people liked the Psalms. In some ways they are very gloomy. The Psalm we read as a first lesson, Psalm 51 begins "Have mercy upon me, oh God, according to your loving kindness; according to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions." When I was not conscious of my transgressions it just seemed like this was just wallowing--it did not speak to me. And then you notice the heading of the psalm, Psalm 51, written by David, after the prophet Nathan had confronted him because of his adultery with Bathsheba and because of his murder of Bathsheba's husband. David developed a sense of need at that point, that never left him. He realized that spiritually he was a sick man, and no matter how popular he was or how good looking he was or successful he was in battle, he needed help and he could not help himself--he had gone beyond the limits of his own ability to control his life or to heal himself. And so he pours out in many of the Psalms, the prayer to God, " Heal me, be my Physician."

Most people, sometime or another in their life, come to that kind of self awareness and say 'I'm sick--I'm sick--I need help.' If you never get to that point of course, you can't be healed; a person who knows everything can't be taught; the person who doesn't realize that he's fallen, can't be raised up. The person who thinks he knows where he is, can't be found--doesn't realize he's lost and the person who doesn't know he's sick can't be healed.

This is why it is the law of divine providence that our tendency to love self above all else and to manipulate life for selfish purposes, must sooner or later come out so we recognize it and see it for all its ugliness. There is a time in our lives when we have the illusion that we're made good, we're made well, simply by association. We associate with good people; we read the Word; we go thru the rituals of the church and

therefore everything should be fine. But that is the Pharisees position. It is finding your salvation in sacrifices--in rituals--in associations. You become saved because you belong to the right group of people and you do the right things. But there isn't that inner sense, that profound desire to be healed, because, as yet, we have not seen the ugliness of certain aspects of human nature.

And so in the Lord's providence, He allows us to go through experiences in which this can be revealed; as compared to a wound that has corruption inside and the wound must be lanced so that the corruption can come out. So there are times in our lives when we suddenly have to face the ugliness of our selfishness. It could be in the marriage relationship, thinking of ourselves as the loving, devoted husband, caring about our wife, caring about our husband or spouse and at a certain point we see how we are, actually abusing the relationship--we're not really listening- we're not really caring--we're only in the relationship for what we'll get out of it. There is that shock of self awareness and then the sense--I need help. I can not save myself . I cannot lift myself above my own self centeredness,' and that's when we call out for the Divine Physician.

The word mercy means love extended to people who are in miseries. So a person who doesn't know that he is in miseries, has no need for mercy! He doesn't ask for forgiveness or mercy from God; he just thanks God that he's not like other people--thank God that I'm not like this Publican! And then in that story in the Word, that person recites everything that he has done- "I fast--I tithe--I do all these things therefore I'm not like other people." And in that same description the other person praying can't even lift his eyes to God, He just says, "Have mercy upon me, a sinner.'

It's one of the reasons that life is hard so that eventually we face the reality of a life that is based only on self and a need for something higher than self; something that delivers us from the tyranny of selfishness; something that will give us a broader purpose in life than just own welfare and our own needs. And this is why people cannot really escape from addictions without turning to a higher power. You must have something higher than yourself. If you try to save yourself by your own power you only plunge yourself deeper into that particular form of spiritual misery.

Mercy comes from love, at the same time from pity, on the one whom He loves. And the Lord cannot exercise this pity from love until the sufferer himself sees and feels his own misery, that is to say, knows and acknowledges it. This is what repentance consists of. Then for the first time the sufferer is healed--like a wound healed by a physician which must be first opened up.

In those who place salvation in external sacrifices, the wounds are not opened for they imagine that they are made just by their sacrifices and that they are healed in that way. We seem to always look for some external means to heal us, some external formula or ritual, when the real healing only comes when we are face to face with the reality of the kind of life we would get if left only to ourselves and the wonderful fact that the Lord has given us higher loves and a higher destiny. And then we turn to the Lord and we find that there is an immediate healing--a sense of wholeness. And there's a wonderful community that develops among people who know that they are sufferers that they are wounded people. A sense of camaraderie--we finally let go of this pretense that we're perfect--that we all have our lives together and in the sense of acknowledgment of need, we become a family. A family of those who say, "Yes, I'm no better than anyone else. I also need the Divine Physician. I need to be healed."

Interestingly there are two songs that express this aspect of human nature and sometimes these songs are looked at as being kind of sentimental and I think their popularity goes to the fact that they address this very deep human need. I'm thinking of the song "Amazing Grace"-- "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

It's wonderful to see a group of people singing that and you look around the room and they all seem like they got their lives together and yet they sing with tears in their eyes because they have come to an awareness of themselves "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

And the other song I'd like to remind you of is "Abide with Me.". "Abide with me fast falls the even tide." In that hymn there are the words "Help of the helpless, oh abide with me. I need your presence every passing hour." It's this recognition that turns us into spiritual beings--beings who are turning to something higher than themselves for their salvation. Opening their hearts and their lives beginning with this confession that of myself I'm sick, I'm wounded, but I also believe that I've been created

by a loving God and that I'm destined for heaven itself and out of mercy and love, He will touch me and lift me up and bring me into everlasting habitations of peace and joy. Amen

Lessons: Psalm 51, Luke 5:17, Divine Providence