

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

June 5, 2005
The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

The Calling of Matthew

⁹As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

¹²On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'^[a] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman

¹⁸While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.

²⁰Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. ²¹She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

²²Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.

²³When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, ²⁴he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. ²⁵After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. ²⁶News of this spread through all that region.

I was shocked when, about five weeks ago, I was sitting at the table with Nathan, our five month old, on my lap and he suddenly reached out and grabbed my plate. He'd never done anything like that before and it really took me by surprise. And thus began a whole new stage of child-rearing. Instead of my little infant blob that really didn't do much, I suddenly had a baby on my hands. A baby who has to be watched every moment when there's anything hot, liquid, or breakable within reach. I mourn the loss of the little blob, he was really easy to take care of, but I'm intrigued by our developing baby.

Watching Nathan reach for things is fascinating. He puts his all into it. Most of us have probably held a baby who suddenly reaches out for something eye-catching. They launch their whole body towards the object. Their little arm unfurls from their side and those tiny fingers splay out like a starfish. They are truly compelled by whatever it is they're trying to reach. For Nathan, reaching for something is a full-contact sport—body, mind, and soul. And even when his reaching is an inconvenience, such as when touching my coffee cup becomes his soul purpose for living, I still admire his singular focus.

It reminds me of the hemorrhaging woman reaching out to touch Jesus' robe. She too was fully focused on the task at hand. She put her whole self into it. And when we learn more about her, we understand why.

The woman suffered from menstrual hemorrhaging. She had painful cramping and ran a constant low-grade fever from infection. She was often light headed and dizzy because of all of the blood loss. This had gone on, non-stop, for twelve long years. Twelve years of chronic pain and embarrassing bleeding would surely have taken its toll. And then, in addition to the physical pain, she also experienced mental and spiritual anguish as a result of her ailment. Because she was bleeding, she was considered unclean, this according to the purity laws we find in the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. She was severely limited in what she was able to do and where she was able to go. For instance, she couldn't go to the Temple to worship. She couldn't prepare meals that other people would eat. The physical limitations she suffered because of her ailment were nothing compared to the social limitations. Everything she touched was deemed ritually unclean and the process for "spiritually disinfecting" was elaborate. Folks crossed the street and walked on the other side when they saw her coming. She hadn't had a visitor in her home for over a decade. She was lonely, depressed, hurting, and oh so tired. She was, in a word, desperate.

Desperation is a terrible thing. When we are desperate, it basically means that we have exhausted our own means of resolving our problems. When we're desperate, we've run out of reasonable ideas, options, and resources. Desperation makes us vulnerable, it strips us of our power and independence. Desperation leads people to make rash decisions that they wouldn't normally make.

We've probably read or heard about situations in which a desperate person makes very bad decisions. The so-called Runaway Bride from Georgia is a perfect example. Here's a young woman, engaged to be married, expecting 600 guests at her wedding and, in one of the most widely-published cases of cold feet, perhaps we'd go so far as to say frozen feet, she took off, pretended to be kidnapped, and led authorities on a wild goose chase and put her poor family through what must have been a living hell. And all because she felt desperate—helpless in the face of social expectations and the promise of a life-long commitment. What she did was stupid and selfish. And, I can't help but think, had she not been feeling desperate to escape the situation, she wouldn't have ever dreamed of doing the kinds of things she did and putting her loved ones through the kind of pain and anguish they suffered.

Other cases of desperation aren't nearly as well-publicized, but that doesn't make the people any the less miserable and desperate. Most suicides are attributable to desperate folks looking for a way out. They've lost the ability, due to mental illness or anguish, to think rationally. Death seems the only way to put an end to the suffering. A bottle full of sleeping pills becomes their messiah, the only thing that can save them from the pain of the living of these days.

We've all probably heard of other folks who find themselves financially desperate. Perhaps they're teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and social humiliation. And so they engage in illegal activity and steal something. From our outside perspective, we think that's foolish and that they've only made the situation worse. But for the desperate person, it seemed like the only option left.

The list goes on—children who cheat in school because they're desperate for their parents' approval. An addict who is desperate for another drink and stops in at Silver Tree Deli for just "one last bottle" of scotch. A young girl who is so desperate to be popular with the boys that she loses her virginity to some young jerk on the couch in a friends' basement during a party—trading her innocence for social rank. The examples need not be as extreme as suicide or theft in order for a person's desperation to be revealed.

And yet, though an undesirable state in which to be, desperation isn't always a bad thing. I can say this after being very ill and desperate myself. But, for anyone feeling desperate right here and right now, I realize that it's really only in hindsight that we can understand desperation as a blessing. I don't take your pain lightly. It truly is a horrible thing to feel desperate. But, I must say, that it's the choices we make when we're desperate that determine the outcome—not the desperation itself. It can be hard for us to accept that being desperate is not always bad. Indeed, it can sometimes turn out to be a very good thing. But we live in a world where we're sent constant messages that we can be in control, independent, and secure through our own doing. We're taught that we never need to be desperate. We're taught that if we just work hard enough, the world can be ours. We're influenced by the myth of the Horatio Alger icon of pulling ourselves up by our boot straps, making something out of nothing, and becoming successful by virtue of our own intelligence and strength. And being desperate is the very antithesis of all of these social messages. We want to be able to fix it ourselves, to make our own way, and to go it alone. But there comes a time when this kind of thinking leads us down lonely paths to a destination of desperation.

Now, let me confess, that I'm pulling a bit of a "pot calling the kettle black" number here. Until I experienced a bout of severe depression last summer, I was a fiercely independent person. I wouldn't allow myself to rely on others for any of the necessities of life. I've always enjoyed other people and am quite a social being, but I never wanted to be dependent on anyone. I've been this way for a long time. My mother often tells a story of a time when I was three and working on some project. She offered to help me. And I responded, "I do it my telf. (I had an awful lisp.) I tell you when I done." When I look back on my three year old self, I get very sad. I want to gather her up in my arms and tell her its okay to ask for help. It's okay to not be able to do it all yourself. But even at such a young age, I'd gotten the message from some where that we are born into this life to go it alone. And if we can't do it alone, we're obviously weak and that's somehow a bad thing.

And I think that's why we, as a society, are uncomfortable with the idea of being desperate. When we're desperate we're vulnerable, we're forced to admit that we can't go it alone, that we're not everything we thought ourselves or wanted ourselves to be. And that's not an easy thing to do. But, it can sometimes be the very thing we need to do in order for us to be desperate no more. It is in the very act of being desperate that we make ourselves vulnerable and therefore find the help we need to overcome our desperation. I know that in my own situation of battling depression, it became so very clear to me that, for the first time in my life, I was helpless to help myself. There was nothing I could do, no book I could read, no activity into which I could escape. I was desperate. And in my desperation I suddenly recognized that, if I was going to get better, I needed help. And, thank God, I was able to get very good help and I did get better and

now I'm a much healthier person than I ever was. I still have a hard time asking for help, but I know that sometimes I need to in order to be the kind of person God has called me to be.

And the hemorrhaging woman must have had some similar kind of experience as well. She knew she needed help from someone outside of herself in order to get better. She too, was desperate. And in her desperation, she did a very socially inappropriate and shocking thing, she threw herself down on the ground in front of hundreds of people just so she could touch the hem of Jesus' robe. Had she been doing just fine, she probably wouldn't have even bothered to show up to see the miracle worker that she'd been hearing so much about. But, she wasn't okay. She needed a miracle. She was desperate for the bleeding to stop, the pain to end, and the humiliation to cease. And she believed, she believed the stories she had heard about this miracle healer who was traveling through the towns around her. She believed that by just touching his robe, she would be healed. Because she was desperate, she believed. Because she was desperate—she threw her arm out, much like Nathan throws his arm out to reach for one of his favorite toys, but instead of entertainment, she sought healing for her body, mind, and soul. And, she got it. Not because she was desperate, but because she believed. But I can't help wondering if she would have believed, had she not been desperate.

And, her belief that grew out of desperation paid off—big time. She was healed. Her twelve years of existing in a living hell came to an end. The bleeding stopped, the pain ended, and she was able to fully participate in the life of her community again. All that because she reached out—in her desperation she reached out to Jesus and he healed her.

And that's the choice we have to make in our desperation, will we reach out for healing or will we suffer in silence. I have heard so many people say they haven't asked for help because they don't want to impose on anyone. And to this I say, "Rubbish!" I believe we all need to feel useful, like we have a purpose. We need to be needed. And when someone asks us for help, it's an opportunity for us to be fulfilled, much more than its an opportunity for someone to get something they need. I know it sounds cliché, but it really is the giver who gets so much more than does the receiver. And so, when someone offers to help us, we're really doing them a favor when we accept their offer. Or, even when we call upon someone before they've even asked. That's the ultimate compliment to be paid—to know that someone thinks enough of you or what you have to offer that they're willing to request it. And yet, so many of us have somehow bought into this myth that self-sufficiency is not only necessary but somehow enjoyable. Again I say, "Rubbish!"

For you see, when we reach out to each other, we find healing—not just for ourselves but for the other as well. We're not like the hemorrhaging woman—we can't touch Jesus' robe. It's not here. He's not here physically. But, he left us with an advocate—the paraclete—who we call the Holy Spirit. And this Holy Spirit, though we can't see it or lay hands on it either, we can experience it through the healing touch of one another. If we want to reach out to Jesus for healing, we need to reach out to each other. That's the gift of the Holy Spirit, that it has created in us a home for God's spirit and that God cares for us, in part, through the words and deeds of each other.

There's the story of a man and his dog who lived in a house along a river. There were severe storms and the river was predicted to overflow its banks. The sheriff came along and told the man that he should evacuate his home. The man responded—"Nope, the Good Lord will save me." Well, the rains came and the river did overflow its banks. The man and his dog watched as the home began to fill with water. Soon a woman came by in a row boat. She offered the man and his dog a ride. He refused saying, "Nope, the Good Lord will save me." As the rain continued, the river rose even further and by now that man was forced on top of his roof—his dog swimming circles around him. A rescue helicopter came along and lowered a ladder to the man. A voice from the helicopter yelled—"Grab on—we'll take you and your dog to safety." The man refused, "Nope, the Good Lord will save me." It wasn't long until the man was almost completely covered in water and his dog was getting tired of swimming. He cried out to God—Lord, aren't you going to save me. The Lord responded—"I sent the sheriff, a rowboat, and a helicopter—what more do you want?"

Indeed, the Good Lord's help often comes in the form of help from a friend, neighbor, or perfect stranger. Let's not hesitate to let God help by accepting the help of another.