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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after Pentecost
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

It would be safe to say that most, if not all, of us were raised in environments where conformity to certain rules and expectations was the norm. Speaking personally, I can remember going from one place to another with my elementary school classmates in neat, single-file lines. To me (in retrospect) that screams "conformity." But at the time, it never occurred to me to question it, but would've we gotten from one place to another less efficiently or safely had we not been in a single-file line? Our hallways had nowhere near the activity to necessitate such traffic management measures, did they? And this certainly was not some solemn ceremony demanding a dignified procession. No, it was more likely a trip from the classroom to the gymnasium.

I suppose it was more for the teacher getting us from one place to another -- as a single-file line made us easier to keep track of. But it wasn't a law; it was simply something that was asked of us and we complied.

Laws, however, get made all the time, and, due to their immense number, they can quickly fade into obscurity, especially considering the ways time and technology can make them irrelevant. How about, for example, those city ordinances prohibiting tying up your horses on Main Street? Outside of Amish Country, such ordinances have indeed become irrelevant. But, on the rare occasion when someone might ride into town on horseback -- and tie the horse up on Main Street -- there could always be that one person to remind the horseback rider of that long-forgotten city ordinance from 1881 about tying up horses on Main Street!

Perhaps you, like me, might be more inclined to follow the rules or obey the law when they serve a purpose...and, when they don't, you might just tie up your horse on Main Street regardless of what some obscure ordinance from 1881 might say.

When we read the Gospels, one group of people stands out, in particular, for their punctilious observance of "the letter of the law," though maybe missing the "spirit." They are the Pharisees, and their legacy extends all the way to the adjective "pharisaic." One dictionary definition of "pharisaic" notes the following -- "practicing or advocating strict observance of external forms and ceremonies of religion or conduct without regard to the spirit; self-righteous; hypocritical."

Needless to say, describing someone as "pharisaic" isn't exactly a compliment!

We encounter the Pharisees today in Matthew, chapter 9, as they ask the disciples about Jesus: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (9:11b). I've read in various places that the Pharisees' role in the Gospels is antagonistic because of the strained relations between the Pharisees and their successors and the early Christians who produced the Gospels; beyond that, I might point out that every religion has adherents whose observance of that religion is punctilious and rigid.

Furthermore, tax collectors, in particular, were regarded as bad people because they represented the much-resented occupation of Jewish territory. They were collecting taxes for Rome -- otherwise known as "the enemy." So, with that little bit of context, it might not be so surprising that Jesus' ministry to them raised more than a few eyebrows. Naturally, modern Christians have applied

Jesus' example here in a number of ways -- perhaps by aligning themselves with the "wrong" people or by ministering to the outcast. But they may have also done this at the expense of losing the support of the wealthy and powerful individuals who made that ministry possible (initially, at least).

A perilous catch-22 to find oneself in...if those who are well don't need a physician, then those who are sick apparently don't need one, either, because who wants to take the risk of offending someone?

But, in this morning's Gospel text, the theme of healing persists, anyway. It is mentioned that "a leader of the synagogue" -- perhaps one not too far removed from those criticizing Jesus for breaking the rules-- comes to Jesus with a request to lay a hand on his daughter (Matthew 9:18). But this scene quickly becomes chaotic with yet another person approaching him to touch the fringe of his cloak before he even gets to the synagogue leader's house; other accounts from the Gospels tell of people coming to Jesus from every direction with one need more urgent than the next.

Not surprisingly, Jesus needed the occasional escape to someplace remote for peace and quiet. It's safe to say, too, that he earned it!

Let's back up a bit now to some pivotal statements in today's Gospel text, where Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:12b-13). Jesus' example here leads us pretty clearly in the direction of caring for the misfits, outcasts, and others on society's margins, and it is possible for us to discover at least an implicit call in this text to do such work. Sure, we won't be able

to do Jesus' work as well as Jesus himself did, but that's no excuse. Furthermore, when we ourselves are on the margins, we can't be too proud to ask for help. So as disciples of Jesus, it would seem fitting for us to offer assistance to others when we're able and to receive assistance when we need it. This would apply when anyone is sick, suffering, despairing, broke, burnt out, struggling, lost, or forsaken. And what good news it is to hear that Jesus is there in those circumstances and that Jesus' own followers are there for each other in those circumstances!

And yes, I would have to depart from the Pharisees, as well, insofar as following the rules is concerned. If someone is dying right in front of us, let us not first ask for his credentials or make sure it's not the Sabbath before doing something. Jesus, I believe, would tell us that such rigidity was both unnecessary and unfaithful. What's more important -- the life we save or the rules we follow? Rules are important, but rarely are they more important than principle.

Jesus offers healing, not only to the hemorrhaging woman or to the synagogue leader's daughter presumed dead, but also to those who are sick, suffering, despairing, broke, burnt out, struggling, lost, and forsaken. And even if you don't fall into any of those categories, there's always one form of Jesus' healing that everyone needs -- the healing of the wound of sin. This is the healing brought to us by his death on the cross. Yes, the greatest wound of all that could've separated God from humanity forever was healed when God sent his Son so that we may go and sin no more and have eternal life.

And we get that not by following the rules but by God's grace, which God so magnificently pours out upon us. As grateful recipients of this grace, we offer thanks and praise to God both here in our worship and outside of here in our

lives. But rules are easier to understand than grace; if God had simply told us what to do instead of giving us Jesus, we wouldn't have to figure any of this out for ourselves -- but the track record of God's people doing what God told them to do wasn't very good. (A quick read through the Old Testament would show you that!)

Having received God's grace in Jesus Christ, however, we have virtually infinite opportunities to be the healing presence of Jesus in our community, and we can focus on, for example, those around us who are food insecure, or unemployed or underemployed, or abused by a person or institution. And if any of us needs that healing, too, we can offer it to each other.

That might be the kind of faith community we could all get behind...

But we can't do it apart from the grace of God and the Healer of our every ill. May his work continue through the healing of spiritual, physical, and societal wounds, whether they're our wounds or not.

Amen.