

*9As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 10And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

The waiting room was small. Each of the chairs but one was filled. A child with a running nose, and a drooping spirit filled the air with little virus particles as a cough shook his whole being.

And I came here to get well.

Dare I touch anything, dare I even breathe? Will I be infected with germs far more harmful than the ones I came here to get rid of?

Finally the nurse calls my name. I escape. I will get well, I hope.

What did Matthew expect when he got up from his seat in the tax booth, put aside his ledgers and walked away from it all? He knew where he had been - he'd been walking on the road named greed. He'd learned to have ears that did not hear the pleas of the poor. He trained his heart not to notice the pleading eyes of hungry children. He had learned to sleep like a baby after grasping the land of peasant after peasant and splitting the profits with Rome. He had learned not to see the eyes that looked at him as scum, the words that filled the air as he walked by - traitor, cheat, thief, scoundrel.

But when Jesus said two words he heard. "Follow me."

He followed.

He sensed that here was the one who could make Matthew human once more. And give him self-respect. And hope.

He followed.

What did Jesus do? Did he lead Matthew off to some sterile room where no disease could touch him, where he could be safe from people like himself? No. Jesus sat him down at table with all sorts of sick people.

For we read: "As Jesus sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this they said to his

disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when Jesus heard this he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'"

Jesus calls us to share his supper together. You and I and tax collectors and sinners are called into this waiting room, this dining room together.

We are sick. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. But Jesus trusts us so much that he puts us shoulder to shoulder with his precious children - the weak, the fear-filled, the greedy, the dishonest, those suffering from every sort of dis-ease. Jesus trusts us with one another, entrusts us to one another.

Will we infect each other? Will there be an epidemic of fear here, or will we experience an outbreak of selfishness? Will temptation find easy entry, easy victory over the will of God here?

So it might seem.

But in his meal Jesus calls into existence what does not exist. Like planting Isaac in Sarah's womb, giving a child to the childless couple, so God is going to give birth to holiness here – faithfulness – hope – love - exactly where we would least expect them - among tax collectors and sinners.

And you.

And me.

The medicine that Jesus uses is faith.

Where will the power come to resist temptation? Pray that the Holy Spirit will give you strength - believe that the Holy Spirit will give you strength to resist today and strength you never had will be yours.

How will a greedy heart become generous, a cold heart warm, a fear-filled heart full of confidence? Gather here and eat and drink the body and blood of our Lord - trust that in this food there is power to transform even you. Jesus will not fail you.

A waiting room full of sick people - this is the church. But as we gather to receive what Jesus prescribes, the infection of his love will be caught by us all. Amen.