

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit.

Over the last few weeks, the Discovery Team and members of our congregation hosted booths at Central Coast Pride. Our intentions were simply to be present, show those attending they were loved, and that if they had questions, we would do our best to answer them. As with all our Discovery Team outings, our hope was to take the core of what we do and who we are within the walls of St. Ben's out into the community.

We had so many beautiful moments that not only impacted those we interacted with but transformed us as well. One of these moments happened during Pridefest when a younger person walked up to the table a little unsure of what to ask. They seemed confused by our presence at the festival. We did our general spiel, and I asked a few questions, and they shared a story about an unpleasant incident that was religious in nature. All they wanted was for it to make sense that we could share a message of love and acceptance while the other folks they encountered had such a different message. I tried to explain our theology a bit, but that wasn't connecting. I saw them start to get a little teary-eyed, so I asked if they would be ok if I hugged them. As we embraced, they said, "All I want to do right now is hate you, but I also can't help but love you, and I don't know what to do with that." I responded by saying, "If you need to hate me, it's ok because I know what I might represent to you. I can handle it, and God can handle all our hurt and anger too." All your feelings are valid. I made sure they knew what happened to them wasn't ok and that if they heard nothing else, I said, to know that they were loved. That was the truth with a capital T. Our conversation continued for a bit, and I shared my information with them, along with an invitation to coffee anytime. While this is just a short snippet from our conversation, it captures the

essence and is an important reminder of why our welcome and presence in all of our many communities as people called to share God's love is so important.

In our gospel text for today, we encounter the call of Matthew as a disciple. With the words from Jesus, "Follow me," Matthew would soon experience what it would mean to be a disciple of Jesus. His first experience is what I would imagine to be a somewhat uncomfortable dinner with what are now former colleagues and other common folks Jesus tends to attract. As Jesus explains to those who have questioned him, he desires mercy and that those who are well have no need of a physician.

In this response, Jesus shares with those listening that an important component of faith is a willingness to participate. Those who are ill are more likely to know they need care. Those who were sinners might seek mercy as care. The key here is the action. Reminding us that following Jesus is not a passive process.

It meant something that Jesus called Matthew to be a disciple.

Tax collectors were known to be unpopular in their time, often not well-liked for their work, and sometimes people of questionable reputations. That he would be called into discipleship truly shows that no one is kept from the table. Jesus chose him, knowing who he was and what he was doing.

As the text continues, a leader humbles himself before Jesus and asks for help with his daughter. As they go to see what has happened, a woman comes up to Jesus to touch his clothes so that she can be healed. This action, this movement, is the faith that Jesus says has healed her. As Jesus and the disciples move on to the daughter, Jesus says that she is just sleeping, and he goes into the house and takes her hand, and she awakens. After these healings, word spreads of all Jesus has done.

An important note in both healing stories is that Jesus is upending the social norms by interacting with these two women. Both would have been outcasts of their society and socially unclean. The woman who touched his cloak was careful not to touch him directly, yet their interaction would have been an unpopular choice. Touching a deceased woman would have also been unclean, yet Jesus did not hesitate to follow her father to help. To show him and his daughter mercy.

The call of Matthew and the dinner following, along with the healing of the two women, provide us with very powerful examples of what it means to be called as disciples of Jesus and who it is that we should be including and welcoming around our table. Maybe we can find ourselves connecting with this story in some way. Maybe we see ourselves in the woman just hoping to reach out and touch Jesus' cloak, not sure what will happen yet hoping, holding on to faith that something will happen if we just keep trying. Or the leader humble in prayer asking for help for a situation well beyond our control. Or maybe we find ourselves a part of the Pharisees, still unsure why Jesus cast such a wide net eating with the tax collectors and the sinners to begin with because that's hard work in our modern times.

I would imagine we all find ourselves connecting with different parts of this text in different moments of our lives. The text can be complex in that way. Yet today, I think the message for us might be a little simpler.

Would Jesus be welcome at our table, given whom he welcomed at his?

As many of you know, the church, in general, has not always been a safe place for LGBTQ+ people. And while we do our best to be welcoming and affirming of all those who walk through our doors, there is always more to learn and work to do. One of the many things I love about the people of this congregation is the hospitality and willingness to try and love people as they ask to be loved.

That may include using pronouns that take effort to remember. Doing the inner work to confront our own biases and think critically about what we know and how we learned it, or being willing to ask questions when we need clarity.

Even though it is uncomfortable, as most growth and change are, we keep trying because we know those things are important in respecting the dignity of the people we have grown to love in our community and those who live outside this place.

Everything we learn and connect to within these walls should be applied and shared in some way outside of them. As Jesus called his disciples to leave their worldly lives behind, so too are we being called to follow Jesus in the same way. While there was no fairytale ending to the story of the person we met at Pridefest, they walked away knowing there was a different way of approaching Christianity, a loving God that also loved them without condition.

This was just one of many spirit-filled moments that we experienced during our three days of tabling. I highly encourage you to talk to those who were at the tables last weekend for their stories. You may find a new gospel experience of your own. One that you might be willing to take with you out into the world. Or maybe even join us at a future table. To follow the path Jesus has laid before us.

To leave our fear of judgment behind and lean into a life of loving those who would be found at Jesus' table, including ourselves.

We don't have to literally give up everything to follow Jesus, as Matthew did yet our text today is calling us into an active faith, calling us into community with one another, to remember that the table is big and wide and ever-expanding.

My prayer for us all is that our hearts, minds, and souls will be open to how the Holy Spirit is moving in our lives and that we are prepared to answer when Jesus says in our daily lives, "Follow me."

**Amen**