

Matthew 9:9-13  
The Touch of the Master's Hand  
WRCoB 9.1.19

I begin with a story in Tony Campolo's book  
"The Kingdom of God is a Party."

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Tony found himself at a late night diner.

"As I sat there munching my donut  
And sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning

The door of the diner swung open  
And, to my discomfort

In marched eight or nine provocative  
And boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place and they ended up sitting  
On either side of me.

Their talk was loud and crude.

I was just about to get up and leave  
When I overheard the one beside me say  
'Tomorrow's my birthday.'

Her friend who sat on the other side of me  
Responded in a nasty tone

'So what do you want me to do about it?  
You want a birthday party?  
You want me to bake you a cake?'

'Chill out!' the first woman said,  
'I was just stating a fact, that's all,  
I don't want anything from you!'

I never had a birthday party anyway,  
So why would I start now?"

~~

Tony knew he had to do something  
And so when the women left  
He spoke to the owner of the diner

'Do they come in here every night?'

'Yeah,' he answered.

'The one right next to me,  
Does she come in every night?'

'Yeah!' he said. 'That's Agnes.  
She comes in here every night.  
Why do you ask?'

'Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday.'

'What do you say we throw a birthday party for her?'

A smile crossed his chubby cheeks  
'Yeah! That's a great idea!'

He called his wife, who did the cooking,  
And shouted,  
'Hey, come out here!'

'This guy's got a great idea.'  
'Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday.'

'This guy wants us to go in with him  
And throw a party for her—  
Right here—  
Tomorrow night!'

His wife came out and smiled and said,  
‘That’s a good idea!’

‘Agnes is one of those people who’s really nice and kind  
And nobody does anything nice and kind for her.’”

So it was set.

The owners of the diner would bake a cake  
Tony would bring decorations.

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Tony was back in the diner at 2:30 the next morning  
And decorated the diner  
That included a huge sign that said  
“Happy Birthday, Agnes.”

The word must have gotten out because by 3:00 am  
The place was packed full of prostitutes!

At 3:30 on the dot Agnes walks in.

~~

Tony writes, “I had everybody get ready  
And when Agnes and a friend walked in  
We all screamed, ‘Happy Birthday!’

“Never had I seen a person so flabbergasted . . .  
So stunned . . .  
So shaken . . .

“Her mouth fell open  
Her legs seem to buckle  
Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her.

“As she was led to one of the stools,  
We all sang “Happy Birthday” to her.

“As we came to the end of our singing with  
‘Happy Birthday, dear Agnes, Happy Birthday to you’

“Her eyes moistened.

“Then when the birthday cake with all the candles  
Was carried out  
She lost it and openly cried.”

~~

She did a very strange thing next, writes Tony.

After she blew the candles out  
They waited for her to cut the cake.

But right in the middle of her party  
Agnes, with tears still in her eyes  
Picks up the cake and leaves

When the door closed  
There was stunned silence in the place.

Not knowing what else to do,  
Tony invited everyone to pray.

Tony writes,

“I prayed for Agnes.  
I prayed for her salvation.  
I prayed that her life would be changed,  
And that God would be good to her.

“When I finished, the owner leaned over the counter  
And with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said

““Hey! You never told me you were a preacher!  
What kind of church do you belong to?”

And in one of those rare moments  
When just the right words came, I answered,

'I belong to a church that throws parties for prostitutes  
At 3:30 in the morning!'

The owner pondered that for a moment.

And then, with a sneer, he answered  
    'No you don't.  
        There's no church like that.  
            If there was, I'd join it.'"

~~

That's the kind of church Jesus came to create.

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As Jesus went about calling disciples  
    He surprised everybody  
        By reaching out to a tax-collector!

In Palestine, a tax collector was the most despised of jobs!  
    Maybe even worse than prostitution.

In the eyes of a Jew, a tax-collector **was** a prostitute  
    Who sold his soul to the Devil.

They were worse than thieves and traitors  
    Because to Palestinians, they were both!

Bad enough the Roman Empire  
    Taxed the citizens of Palestine

But to have the taxes collected by fellow countrymen  
    Was as low as a person could get.

So when Jesus called Matthew to become a disciple  
    No doubt, the others raised their eyebrows  
        Muttered under their breaths

And wondered to themselves  
    If they hadn't made a mistake  
        By choosing to follow Jesus!

On the other side of the story  
    Matthew dropped everything he was doing  
        Left his desk, his accounting books  
            His calculator and his money purse

And invited Jesus to dinner  
    At his expensive home in the suburbs.

~~

Matthew invited Jesus to dinner.

And much to their chagrin  
    He invited his new colleagues  
        Andrew, Peter, James and John.

He also invited all of his old cronies  
    Tax collectors and sinners  
        Hoping to introduce them to Jesus.

Kind of like Tony Campolo in the diner  
    Surrounded by all those prostitutes!

~~

All this time the Pharisees  
    The church folk of Jesus' day watched closely.

And they complained amongst themselves  
    "Why does he eat with sinners and low-life?"

**Matthew 9:12-13 (CEV) Jesus heard them and answered, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others.' I didn't come to invite good people to be my followers. I came to invite sinners."**

Find, herein, a lesson for the church today.

Church is not an exclusive social club.

It is not as the old saying goes  
Just a haven for saints.  
It is a hospital for sinners.

~~

I remember overhearing a comment from a church member  
In an earlier church I served.

He didn't know I was behind him  
When he said to someone else

He didn't like the kind of people  
The pastor was bringing into church.

Did he have any clue he sounded exactly  
Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day?

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Jesus invites the broken, the sin-sick  
The weary, the poor, the outcasts of society  
To join him in church.

Jesus designed church to be similar in composition  
To Matthew's house party;

Disciples, sinners and tax-collectors  
The whole motley crew of humanity  
All gathered around the table with Jesus.

Jesus came to seek the lost.

At Matthew's table, the lost were found.

And those who thought they had the inside track  
Were the ones standing on the outside looking in.

The center of Jesus' ministry is mercy not malice  
Compassion not condemnation  
Forgiveness not judgment  
Acceptance not rejection.

And it is the center of ministry at West Richmond.

~~

Jesus knows the value and worth in everyone,  
Knows the gifts God has put in their soul.

Jesus invites Matthew to become a follower

Matthew!!

And he, In turn, writes the very words we read today!

**We** may not see their potential,  
**We** may not see their worth,  
**We** may not think them valuable,

But Jesus does.

And if you'll let him,  
Jesus will turn a broken, worn-out, tramped-on soul,  
Into a Master-piece.

~~

*And many a person with life out of tune  
And battered and scarred with sin  
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd  
Much like the old violin.*

*But the Mater come, and the foolish crowd  
Never can quite understand  
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought  
By the touch of the Master's hand.*

~~

During the singing of our last hymn  
I invite you to consider the anointing service.

The anointing service is a healing service.

It is an opportunity to experience the forgiveness of sin  
To strengthen one's faith  
And to discover healing and wholeness.

Like the old spiritual,

*There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole.*

*There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul.*

The anointing oil has no magical properties.

It is olive oil with frankincense.

God is the balm within the oil.

By faith, its healing properties become available  
When we use the oil  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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Jesus tells us to come to him  
We who are weary and in need of rest.

He is gentle and humble in heart

And there, you will find rest for your souls.

~~

Let us pray.

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Join me in our responsive Invitation to Healing