

Proper 5 A 08  
Matthew 9:9-26  
June 1, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill  
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Notes not for publication

We're going to do an important thing today. We're going to commit all our different forms of ministry as an offering to God, as an act of worship. In one of my former churches, we had a form like this, but we called it a volunteer form. We ended up changing that name, because we wanted to make it clear that our offering was distinct from the other ways we might volunteer in the community. The church is not just another version of the Kiwanis Club or the PTA. Maybe the ways we serve that kind of community group and the way we serve the church looks similar. Maybe we see our community service as a form of ministry, as well we should; you can and should serve God in all sorts of places. But what we're doing here is different; it's ministry rather than volunteering. And the difference is our motivation. The difference is that here we recognize God as both the source and the goal of the gifts we bring to our work. When we serve through the church, it demonstrates the full circle of our identity as people who belong to God and who seek God.

On one side of the circle we find the assertion that we belong to God, or more specifically to Jesus, as a result of encountering his grace and his power in one way or another. The scripture reading gives us some examples of how this happens. It's a long text, a little disjointed, but when you go piece by piece, you can see Jesus' power and authority working God's will of life in the mess of people's lives, fighting suffering and alienation. The woman who had borne a hemorrhage for twelve years was probably at the end of her rope. She would have been completely isolated from her

community due to her flow of blood; she might have been shameless, willing to try anything. So she touched the hem of Jesus' garment, and his power met her reach and healed her body and her life.

Jesus claims and transforms lives in another way in this text. He calls Matthew away from his life as a tax collector. We don't know whether he was a dishonest collector or not, but we do know that his life's work would have been based on collaborating with the brutal occupying Roman army, which would have definitely left him outside the circle of good Jewish people. Jesus just says come on, and Matthew goes—we don't know any more than that. But we must know that nothing could have been the same for him after that.

In claiming these people, encountering them with his life-giving power and authority, Jesus meets people where they are. He doesn't ask them to perfect themselves first, straighten up and fly right first. Jesus says he comes not to the well, but to the sick; he comes not to the righteous, but to sinners. In this passage he sits down to eat and fellowship with people who live outside the circle of decency—probably some because of their own choices, and some through no fault of their own. And whether we in this place sit inside or outside that circle, whatever secrets or faults we carry, whatever hurt we bear, it's very important to me that people who call themselves Christian begin right here—with the knowledge that this life of faith is a gift that God has long sought to give to us, not something we made happen.

The power of God's claim on us is what moves us into action in ministry. Our identity as God's people is one we live out of, not just sit in. Jesus says God desires

mercy, not sacrifice, loving relationship with others, not going through the motions. Our activity in ministry is not a way for us to prove that we are worthy of the gift. We can't earn God's love or be so successful in ministry that God just has to let us into heaven. Serving the world in ministry is something we do in response to God's love, out of joy and gratitude. Accepting what God has done for us and given us in the life of Jesus is an ongoing, lifelong effort for us. And ministry is part of the pattern that effort takes.

What turns regular old volunteer service into ministry is what we seek. When we seek the experience of God's presence and will through our work, that transforms what we do into ministry. I think this happens in a couple of ways. It happens when we decide to reach out in service to the ones who are not normally welcome, who are cut off from community, who normally have no power or voice—the ones Jesus called “the least of these.” Serving this kind of people is a way not to feel powerful or virtuous, but a way to come face to face with Christ. If you'd like to experience the offer of life that comes so abundantly from Jesus, go where he said he would meet us—in the places where people are in pain; at the table where sinners gather.

There's another way to seek the presence of God through ministry, and that is to intentionally engage the gifts God made us with. Now, in the church, when we start to fill out forms like we're doing today, often we try to match up the jobs on the list with what we're good at. This is what we think of as gifts—talents and abilities. You're real musical, so you should sing in the choir. You know how to fix stuff, so we'll put you on Trustees. You know how to cook, so you should work Café Susanna or bake for Market

Days. There's no question that people's skills and talents are a huge resource for the church, and some of you know that I walk around making mental notes about who knows how to do what, for future reference.

But there's another way of looking at gifts. A wonderful writer I read this week, Marilyn McEntyre, suggests we think of gifts as something more basic to a person, "our ways of being in the world, those features of character that seem consistent from early childhood onward—predispositions, inclinations, curiosities, energy levels..." (Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "Every Lamp Trimmed and Burning," *Weavings*, May/June 2008, p. 20).

McEntyre says this kind of understanding of gifts moves us "well beyond talent scouting. What you *do* may be a great gift to the rest of us (you musicians, cooks, dynamic speakers, and green thumbs), but who you *are* is the greater gift. If we shift the focus from 'what' you do to 'how' you go about living in the world..." it leads us to a new set of questions. "What is it like to be you?" What is most meaningful to you about work? About play? About church? What gets your passion stirred up? What really makes you mad, and what do you do when it happens? Do you like to talk, or to be quiet? How do you show affection? How do you deal with pain or grief? We often just don't notice much of what comes naturally for us; we certainly don't see it as a blessing to anybody. "But it may be that in our most ordinary acts and habits of mind and speech we bear gifts for one another" (quotes and paraphrase, *ibid.*).

Beginning to see these as gifts that God planned in us, alongside our more obvious talents, is to begin to take people seriously in a new way, and to call them to

take themselves more seriously as well. When a church discovers that those inherent gifts are a place where we actually find God, “seeing others as gift-bearers, and as gifts” shifts our whole perspective. I think of Madeline Dickey, now at Deer Creek, who always seems so surprised when I tell her how much I sincerely miss her smile, and how her sweet presence can just soften up a whole room. *The ministry of smiling.* I remember a woman at one church who was very committed to mission and helping the poor, but she couldn’t get around much and didn’t have much money. She thought she didn’t know how to pray, either. But she did know how to cross stitch, and she knew how to talk to God a little and sit and listen a lot as she worked. She made some things to sell and gave the money to mission projects. And the pieces she gave me, while they are beautifully done, are so much more valuable to me as tokens of who she was. *The ministry of self-giving.*

I think of more than one person in this place who has walked through terrible trials—some have shown us what it looks like to come out the other side; others have gone on to eternal peace, but not without inspiring us all first with their faith in the goodness of God. *The ministry of hope in the real world.* I think of folks who know from experience that sometimes there are no right words to say; there’s just *the ministry of sitting with*. When I look at the ministry needs of the church, and who might do what, I do try to keep this kind of gift in mind. What I hope is that we will all begin to think about ourselves and about each other in this way, and that we come to believe that living into these deep gifts is an important way of growing towards God.

On the form you'll be turning in a few moments from now, there are lines at the end, where you can include whatever gift pops into your mind, whether you think it useful or not. And of course you can come back later and add things that occur to you. But as you make your commitment today, ask yourself, how does my service bring me closer to God? How does it help me remember and celebrate the loving, healing, saving activity of Jesus in my life? How does it help me look within to gifts God placed within me that I normally take for granted? We are not volunteers; we are the people of God, the people of Jesus Christ and his good news for all. May we know and trust that the abundant, persistent love of God is the source, the goal and the sustenance of our ministry in Christ's name.