

Proper 5A, June 8, 2008  
Christ Church, Winnetka

## Getting Your Way

How did you get your way as a child? Go ahead, think about it for a second. My guess is that if I asked for some answers from around this room right now we might hear things like: “Well, I threw fits.” Or, “I weaseled my way out of my parents.” Or “I just pretended to be cute.” In my case, my own particularly favorite way was to be smart. I talked my way into or out of whatever I happened to want.

This is an exercise a friend of mine named Miriam regularly leads groups of people to do. She works with clergy and leaders of nonprofit organizations on leadership and spirituality issues. The interesting thing about the exercise, she says, is the accuracy with which people can recall stories about how they got their way as children. And the degree to which those childhood mechanisms still function in adult lives. When I’m faced with a situation that isn’t going just exactly according to my plan, my first instinct still is to try to talk my way around it. The other fascinating thing about this little exercise is to notice how many of the things people recall from their childhood have a subtle element of judgmentalism attached to them. “I threw tantrums ... I lied ... I held my breath ... or whatever.” Often, the stories from childhood are not really about bratty little kids getting their way ... they’re about shame and the deep suspicions wound around most of our souls that we are not good enough. Miriam leads people in this exercise to remember the ways they acted as children and then asks them to set aside their judgments of that behavior by reminding them that those are the ways they survived as children. Talking my way out of or in to things was how I managed to live as a child. It’s part of what has made me who I am. I remember some of my behaviors as a kid and I am ashamed. What I need to be is grateful.

I want to make a critical distinction here between two very confused words: a distinction between shame and guilt. Guilt is sometimes a very appropriate thing to feel. I made a choice to write with magic marker all over my grandmother’s new coffee table, and for that I quite properly felt guilty ... especially after the consequences of my actions were enforced. But shame is another issue altogether. Shame feeds some primal fear that I will not have what I need, that I am somehow responsible for not having it. Shame tells me that I am not worth loving, that I am a mistake, a burden, that just because of who and what I am I will never be good enough. Guilt may or may not be appropriate and healthy. Shame needs to be faced and shame needs to be healed. I need to love that resourceful little kid in me who still believes at some level that if he isn’t smart enough he won’t have what he needs, that he won’t be loved.

I believe all of this because of the gospel. I believe the healing of shame is the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe it because of stories like the one we’ve heard today. Matthew is a tax collector. Talk about a source of shame. It’s hard to explain just how hated tax collectors were in first century Palestine. If you’ve ever chafed under federal or state tax rates you ought to read a short list of the tax structure imposed by the Romans on their

occupied territories. Matthew was a Jew who made his living by skimming off the top what he could of the taxes he collected from his neighbors. Taxes that would be sent off to pagans who would build blasphemous temples with them. Tax collectors were excluded from the synagogue; they were listed with blasphemers and murderers as people to be shunned.

And it is straight to this tax collecting Matthew, sitting there in his Armani suit, right to him sitting at his shameful desk that Jesus goes. “Follow me,” he says. This is not somebody I would have chosen to be an apostle. I’d have gone to the biggest Synagogue and found out who the largest pledger was. Called someone who already chaired the temple building committee. I’d have looked for the person who wasn’t afraid to sit in the first pew ... the one nearest the pulpit. But not Jesus. He quotes the prophet Hosea when someone questioned his hiring practices. “Go and find out what this means: I want mercy, not sacrifice.” Mercy. The Hebrew word is *chesed*, a tough word to translate, but literally it means something like “womb love.” I want womb-love, the love of a mother for her child, says God. I don’t care about external observances nearly as much as I do about what’s inside. I’m not looking for the biggest and best and brightest. I do want to know whose heart has been broken. Matthew might well have been someone only a mother could love.

It’s not too hard to imagine that Matthew had had his heart broken. It’s not too hard to imagine that Matthew found himself looking into the faces of former friends and neighbors who more likely than not despised him – looking into their faces day after day and dying inside. It is not too hard to imagine that Matthew had come to despise himself, to hate where he was and what he had become and not even to remember very clearly how he had gotten there. It is not too hard to imagine that Matthew had long ago decided that his life was just the way it was and was going to be. It is not hard to imagine Matthew sitting in judgment on himself and losing hope that he could ever change.

And it is to Matthew that Jesus goes. Jesus calls Matthew. Not because he was so good, not because he had it all together, not because he was holier than all the others ... but precisely because he was not. And he knew it.

And this is great and mighty good news. It is good news for people who know the brokenness in their lives, who know how they have failed, who know how much they do not have it all together ... despite their best efforts, despite the good front they put up, despite the official press release version of themselves they put out for public consumption. I had a conversation with someone recently who hadn’t been to church in years and was contemplating coming back because of a crisis in her life. “I couldn’t just show up though on any old Sunday morning,” she said. “I’m not good enough just to show up.” I have conversations like that with some regularity. One of the terrible things we have done to the faith of Jesus is to turn it again and again into the religion of the Pharisees and Saducees. We seem to have a talent for taking God’s offer of the free gift of love and turning it into what a friend of mine calls “Don’t-step-on-the-cracks” religion. Many, many people in this world think that’s what Christianity is – simply a matter of being good, of doing the right thing – a kind of ecclesiastical good hygiene. But what

Christianity is really about is being ravished by the love of a God who is willing to go to any lengths to show us how completely, how deeply, how vastly we are loved – whether we ever do the right thing or not. And accepting that kind of love means that we will change ... not out of fear, but naturally out of gratitude. It is the healing of shame.

What are the parts of yourself that you judge? What in your life do you remember with shame? The parts of yourself you don't want anyone to know about, least of all God? Where are you broken? Where do you hurt? What could it mean to hear Jesus say to you that God wants mercy, *chesed*, rather than sacrifice? Can you imagine that it is the broken you, the fearful you, the cynical or depressed or angry you, that Jesus is calling to follow him? He is. He is here. Listen.