

s-P5A-08-I See Dead People  
Mt. 9:9-13 *The call of Matthew*  
Mt. 9:18-26 *Two healings*  
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## I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

Once a week, I get together with a few friends who are also pastors of United Churches of Christ here in the south Bay Association. We usually meet up at Eden UCC these days—it's sort of a half-way point between San Leandro and Fremont.

Every Wednesday afternoon we look ahead two weeks at the lectionary texts and choose one for our meditations and discussion. We often use a method of study called "Lectio Divina." Some of you are undoubtedly familiar with it—we take turns reading the passage slowly, using different versions of the Bible, and let it speak to us for a few minutes. We "chew it over" in our minds. Then we share our insights.

On May 29, our text was the one we read today—both the call of Matthew and the subsequent story of how Jesus healed two persons. So, we're quietly meditating on the meaning of this passage, when all of a sudden, Reverend LeAnn Blackert, pastor of our San Leandro Community UCC, pops out with "I see dead people!"

Well, we all recognize that line from the film, "The Sixth Sense," which starred tough guy Bruce Willis and that adorable Haley Joel Osment. In that movie, a mother brings her young son to a child psychologist because he keeps having these weird experiences of seeing people who are supposed to be dead and gone. The question is, of course, is the child really seeing what he says he sees? And if he is, then why? What does it all mean?

I won't spoil the story for those of you who haven't seen the movie. At any rate, LeAnn wasn't talking about literally seeing ghosts walking around town. When we asked her to explain her peculiar outburst, this is what she said:

"Look at this story! It's full of dead people—people who are spiritually dead, socially dead, and physically dead."

Aha! We all nodded our heads. We could see exactly what she was talking about.

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OK—this passage starts out with Jesus calling a tax collector—Matthew—to join him as a disciple. I've mentioned before that first-century tax collectors

weren't just IRS agents. They were Roman collaborators, paid well for putting the bite on their fellow Jews; in other words, they were finks. They were social outcasts of the worst kind—neither fish nor fowl; they were despised by their Roman masters and hated by their neighbors.

Nobody wanted to sit down to dinner with a tax collector. He'd steal your wallet and then report you for not carrying your ID. He'd do you a favor and then send you a bill for services rendered. If Walt Disney made a movie about first-century Judea, the tax collectors would be portrayed as big fat rats with whiney voices.

But the Bible tells us that Jesus, of all people, not only hung around with tax collectors and other riff-raff, but even *chose* one of them—Matthew—to be, not just a follower or a hanger-on, but one of the best known apostles.

Why did Jesus pick this guy? Tax collectors were a dime a dozen—that was Zacchaeus's profession, remember, and Jesus ate at his house but didn't invite him to join the tour. We can only speculate what quality Jesus observed or sensed in Matthew that elicited those words: "Come with me." We can't know what Jesus saw in him that day, but if he was, in fact, the man who wrote what we call the Gospel of Matthew, all we have to do is read his book and a few things become obvious.

First, Matthew's Gospel is beautifully balanced. It flows smoothly between on-the-spot reporting, theological discourse, and practical advice for living. I bet if you asked most Christians which book of the New Testament is their favorite, or at least which one do they most often turn to, it would be Matthew.

Matthew's Gospel could be called "the gospel to the Jews" because it is so steeped in Jewish thought, belief, and scripture. Matthew shows Jesus, the Messiah, speaking directly to his own people, and perfectly describes the misunderstandings and suspicions with which Jesus had to deal.

At the same time, Matthew's Gospel contains some truly seminal and essential Christian writings. If all we had of Jesus was the Sermon on the Mount, we probably would have enough scripture right there to justify a church.

Matthew gave us the Lord's Prayer, one of our ancient unifying liturgies. He described for us a whole host of biblical metaphors: the mustard seed, the lost sheep, the unattended banquet—images we use to understand the concept of the kingdom of God.

The Jesus that Matthew loved and followed was the Jesus of the second commandment, described as important as the first. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your heart and with all your mind—and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Where did all this erudition and sensitivity come from? A rat fink tax collector dragged in off the dusty street! Socially speaking, Matthew was a dead

man walking. He was less than a nobody. He was a minus, a bad smell in the nostrils of his people. The other disciples probably looked down their noses at him and tried not to sit next to him at the table.

Yet Jesus called him. Called him for a reason, or two or three. What Matthew had the potential to bring to the Christian movement; but more important, what Jesus had the potential to bring to Matthew!

Transformation from dead man walking to living disciple. Jesus yanked that guy right out of the tax booth and the first thing he did, right after dinner, was take him along on a mission of mercy. And not just any mission, but into the home of an important local Jewish official.

That would be like taking a pimp with you to the governor's mansion to inventory the silver. Pretty risky!

Another risky situation is this one with the woman who touches Jesus' cloak. In a different way, and for vastly different reasons, this woman is also socially dead. Not by choice of career, like Matthew, but through no fault of her own. She's ill. She's been sick for twelve long years with an affliction that makes her ritually unclean, an outcast, someone to avoid rather than to pity.

If Matthew, sitting in his tax booth, was feeling desperate, then how do you think this woman must've felt? Twelve years a pariah. Enough suffering, physical and social, to make her risk sneaking up on a rabbi and touching his clothes. She could have been killed for such an affront—but she was already a dead woman walking. There was little else that could be worse.

I think we sometimes forget how very, very extraordinary Jesus' reaction to people like this was. He didn't shun and avoid the greasy tax collector. He didn't—as all his religious training insisted he do—run directly to the Temple and offer a sacrifice for having been touched and befouled by an unclean person. Jesus saw beyond the things that declared people socially dead and was ready, willing, and able to see the real person within—the valuable, sensitive, suffering person within.

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At the home of the local official, Jesus and his entourage had to push their way through a noisy crowd of looky-loos. You know the kind of people I'm talking about: some folks just seem to have a nose for tragedy and suffering. They like to get near it and bathe vicariously in the excitement. Sort of soap-opera syndrome times one hundred.

And in some cases, these vampires who receive nourishment from other people's blood manage to impede those who are truly going to help. Maybe by simply getting in the way, as voyeurs do at accidents; maybe by using up vital resources, as disaster junkies who rush off to "rescue" people they don't really

care about. Or maybe, as in this case, it's just a weakness for being in the know when something's going on. Johnny on the spot, maybe with a casserole as camouflage. Well, we're all guilty to some extent. It's an unfortunate trait of human nature to run toward a fight.

But the point is, these folks who were clogging up the front porch were in direct contrast to the official who asked Jesus for help. The official was taking a risk. Jesus was a known agitator—one whose friends were none too savory—and the official had to really unbend to ask this dusty itinerant preacher for help.

His love for his child was such that he was willing to look weak—or even worse, to look like a fool—in front of his constituency, on the off chance that this Jesus was the healer he had heard he could be. Did he have perfect faith? Probably not. He'd never met Jesus before; probably got all his knowledge about the master second or third hand. But sometimes having the willingness to commit yourself is even better than having perfect faith.

The gaggle of gossips didn't care about the girl who died. They weren't mourning. That's why they reacted so oddly when Jesus told them she wasn't really dead. They weren't ready for the party to be over. It wasn't until Jesus helped the revived child out of bed that they all ran off, rushing to be the first to spread this NEW bit of news! A girl who was dead was now alive! Tell all about it!

But you can be sure that the girl's father didn't go anywhere. I bet he was hugging his daughter and praising God and thanking Jesus and being grateful that something—something beyond the mores of society and the expectations of his position—pushed him to take a risk of faith.

Sometimes we reach out to Jesus.

Sometimes, he reaches out to us.

And sometimes, we need someone to reach out to Jesus on our behalf.

As Jesus says, choose life! We don't have to remain socially, spiritually, or even physically dead. Jesus is the resurrection, and the life—the life of each one of us, in every way! Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER:

When we are suffering, when we are feeling outcast, when we are simply going through the motions, Jesus come to us with words of encouragement. "Courage, daughter. Take heart, my son. Little girl, get up!" Lord, open our ears to hear those wonderful words! Amen.