

June 11, 2023
Lectionary 10, Year A
The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Powerless

We admitted that we were powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable.

Those words might sound familiar to some of you. They are a paraphrase of the first step in the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and of many other twelve step groups. According to the wisdom of AA, admitting powerlessness is essential in dealing with alcohol addiction. What other addicts and mental health professionals have learned ever since Bill W.'s twelve steps were first published in 1938 is that they work for other kinds of addiction as well and that the first step in all of these programs is vitally important; admitting powerlessness.

In our gospel reading for today, we run across some people who are, powerless, though they are not, as far as we know, addicts. They are facing situations that have become unmanageable; situations that they, themselves, are powerless to change. Situations that, like addiction, are life threatening, life destroying. They are broken people when we "meet" them in the gospel reading, with problems that they can't solve.

We probably all know that feeling, or something like it. Without question we have all faced situations over which we had no power. The diagnosis of an illness in ourselves or a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship that we didn't want to end, the death of a loved one, the closing of some door in our lives, without a sense of what would come next, of how a window would be opened, of how hope remained, or of how our future would unfold, or even if it could.

So maybe we can relate to two of the people in our gospel reading, and relate to why they did what they did. The two people that I'm talking about are the leader of the synagogue and the bleeding woman.

The leader of the synagogue, one of the distinguished religious leaders in the Jewish community, who were often opposed to Jesus, had to put aside any reservations he might have had about this new rabbi, who had no official credentials, who had no official recognition or sanction, and who went about saying strange things about God and spending time with people who were very much on the margins, on the outside of respectable society. It was to Jesus that he went, because he knew that he was powerless. All of his respectability, all of his education, all of his recognition, all of his status had not kept his daughter from dying. He was facing the situation that perhaps makes all of us feel the most powerless, the death of a beloved one. So, he was willing to do whatever it took, even if what it took was kneeling at the feet of one who was suspect in religious circles, kneeling at the feet of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth, kneeling at the feet of Jesus and begging him for the life of his child. In that moment of complete powerlessness, he was willing to put aside everything that had once been most important to him, willing to put aside his pride, his status, his dignity, his accomplishments, for the sake of his daughter, on the chance that Jesus could bring her back to life.

The other powerless person in today's story was the bleeding woman. Of course, she was probably a lot more used to feeling powerless than the man of status in today's gospel reading. She was a woman in a society where women were usually powerless, but her situation of powerlessness was different from the usual powerlessness of women in her culture. Because she had had a hemorrhage for twelve years. And that means that for twelve years she had been unclean. Which means that, in a society that sharply delineated what a woman could and couldn't do, she couldn't function in what was considered to be a woman's sphere. She was unclean. She couldn't cook meals for people. She was unclean. She couldn't touch

people to care for them, people like young children or aging parents. She couldn't touch or be touched in love. She was isolated; alone and powerless. So, what else could she do? For years she had suffered and now she saw her chance, to reach out her hand and maybe, maybe, be healed; be made clean.

Maybe we could see that reaching out of the hand as an act of power itself, but I think in her head, it was an act of desperation. Because it could have gotten her into a lot of trouble. Her, a broken and unclean woman, touching a stranger, a man, a teacher; touching someone clean and possibly transferring her uncleanness to him. But her life had become unmanageable. So, like the leader of the synagogue, she overlooked all of the reasons not to reach out to Jesus and she touched him.

For both of these powerless people, their interactions with Jesus, turned out to be blessings to them. I feel sure that they never regretted reaching out to Jesus, putting aside pride or fear or cultural and religious taboos and putting themselves into Jesus' power. Because for both of them, Jesus' power was healing, life, salvation. The religious leader's daughter lived again. The woman's bleeding stopped. These daughters were restored to their communities and where once there was death, loss, rejection, despair, there was joy and peace and new power, flowing from God to them, power for life, power that created and restored community.

Them, I get; how in their powerlessness they turned to Jesus, because they had nothing left, nowhere else to turn, and their lives had become unmanageable, as they faced situations that they could no longer deal with, problems they could not solve, pain that they could not bear.

I'm a little bit more confused when it comes to Matthew. Because all we know about Matthew is that he was a tax collector, sitting at his tax booth, when Jesus came along and said "Follow me." And that he followed. He got up from his booth, and, from the sound of it, left every aspect of his business behind, and followed Jesus. It's hard to figure out why he might have done that. True we don't have a lot of details about his life. All that we can guess is that he had a lucrative

business, collecting taxes for the Roman occupiers, and that there were probably plenty of people in his community who resented him for the work that he did. Nobody back then or today is a huge fan of tax collectors, but back then tax collectors were notorious for collecting more than they were supposed to, growing rich off of the extra taxes that they collected that went, not to Rome, but into their own pockets. All tax collectors in Jesus' time were considered to be collaborators, which they were, and criminals, which some of them probably were.

But knowing all of that doesn't tell us why Matthew followed Jesus. Was he tired, maybe? Tired of the rejection that he experienced from his community? Was he tired of himself? Tired of growing rich on the backs of his people? Was he tired of the Romans, tired of feeling like he was trapped, by his position, even by his wealth? Did he consider himself to be powerless to change his life? Is that why he followed when Jesus saw him, looked him in the eyes, and said "Follow me?"

Did Matthew see in Jesus a power that wouldn't harm, wouldn't destroy, that didn't come with soldiers and crosses, that couldn't be counted in a ledger, but that came with joy, with love, with eyes that saw the truth and loved anyway? Maybe by the time that Jesus came along, with his invitation to follow, Matthew, had already started to realize that he was powerless and that his life had become unmanageable. Maybe he was ready for a new kind of power.

And then there are the Pharisees, who asked Jesus' disciples the question, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

They certainly knew that they had power. They were the Pharisees, the ones who interpreted the religious law for people, who told them what they could and couldn't do, who they could and couldn't spend time with, who was clean and who was unclean. They decided who was respectable and who was not. Their good opinion mattered; their words mattered. They were the ones who usually were invited to the dinner parties, they were the ones people tried to please, they were the ones that people listened to.

And yet, there was Jesus, eating with the rejects, the tax collectors, the sinners, the ones that the Pharisees and many others had deemed unfit for polite society.

But here's what I think. I think that the Pharisees might have wanted to sit down with Jesus, this new rabbi, this new teacher, who blessed and healed and who seemed to know God so well. But they couldn't, because, if they had they would have had to sit down with sinners, they would have had to be seen to be equals with tax collectors. They would have had to give up their power. And, quite frankly, it seems that that wasn't something that they were willing to do. Instead, they stood outside, looking in, wondering, objecting, criticizing who Jesus ate with, who Jesus loved, how he used his power, and who he used it on.

In today's gospel reading, those who were powerless and those who were willing to walk away from worldly power grew close to Jesus and experienced his transformative power in their lives. Those who rejected the way that Jesus was exercising his power, those who thought that it was within their power to decide who was in and who was out, well, they were left on the outside, looking in.

And as for me, as for us, I wonder what I am clinging to, what we are clinging to. What imagined power, position, status, sense of self-control and self-determination, keeps us from throwing ourselves at the feet of Jesus, from reaching out and touching his robe, from jumping up, when he says "Follow me"? I wonder who have we decided we can't be seen with, whose stories are beneath our notice, who we can't sit with, who we can't eat with. I wonder what might prevent us from sitting down at the table where Jesus sits, with the tax collectors and the sinners.

And I wonder what might happen; what Jesus might do in our lives, in our community, how Jesus' love, might heal, might transform, might bring new life, might lead us on new paths, might create for us new relationships, how Jesus' power might fill us when we finally admit that we are powerless. Amen.