

Matthew 9:9-13 ⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when Jesus heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

Matthew 9:18-31 ¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that moment. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread through all of that district. ²⁷ As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” ²⁸ When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you have faith that I can do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” ²⁹ Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.” ³⁰ And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, “See that no one knows of this.” ³¹ But they went away and spread the news about him through all of that district.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-31

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“On the Fringe”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Earlier this week, I was trying to find a picture to use as the background for the slides we use this morning in worship, so I googled the term “fringe”. That was an enlightening experience. The first set of photos that popped up were of a hairstyle. It’s kind a long and straight, and involves the bangs covering one’s eyes, which I don’t personally find very appealing, but that’s not the first time I’ve been baffled by trends in style, so...y’know...great! The next batch of photos that popped up were from a TV show about ten years back called “Fringe”. It had John Noble in it, and he’s a pretty good actor, but it’s about an FBI agent and psychopath who work together to solve crimes that involve paranormal stuff. I’m going to stick with NCIS, but I guess “Fringe” appeals to some folks because it’s got a healthy following. The third batch of pictures were clothing, mostly from either the 1920s or the 1970s, but all that’s making a comeback here in the 2020s. There were flapper dresses and funky leather jackets with fringe hanging off the sleeves, and even the occasional pillow or lampshade or set of curtains.

That got me a little closer to what I was looking for, but in the end, I had to actually google the Hebrew term “*tallit*” to find what I wanted. A *tallit* is a prayer shawl that has been worn by adherents of Judaism for millenia. These days, you can get one in any combination of colors you’d like, but

historically, a tallit was white with blue threads woven in. In fact, Scripture tells you that the tzitzit, or the tassels on the four corners of the garment, are supposed to be blue. And all along the edge of the shawl is more tzitzit, or long fringe. There are several knots in the tzitzit to remind the wearer of God's commandments. In scripture, the tzitzit around the edge of the prayer shawl is often called kanaph because they flutter and dance about. Kanaph means 'wings'. Many scholars believe that when scripture speaks of the Messiah having healing in his wings, they're referring to the tzitzit or the fringe around his prayer shawl. This morning, we meet a woman in our lesson who absolutely believes that just touching the fringe of Jesus' prayer shawl – the tzitzit, the kanaph – will bring healing.

But before we dive into her story any deeper, let's talk about one more meaning for fringe. You all know it. I alluded to it in the sermon title this morning. Fringe can mean 'on the edge'. Fringe ideas are ideas that are kind of 'out there' – ideas that are odd, nuts, not mainstream, right? Fringe music is not played on the radio. And fringe people are the marginalized, the outcasts, the side-lined. They're the people who live on the edges of society.

In our lesson today, we meet several of them, and they teach us something of how Jesus works in the world. The first we encounter is Matthew. You may be surprised that I name him as one on the fringe, for you may be thinking to yourself: "Isn't he one of the twelve disciples, one of the ultimate insiders in Jesus' Kingdom?" He is. But he didn't start that way. He starts out as tax-collector. And they were definitely on the fringes back then. That's because tax collectors worked for Rome, the oppressing, conquering government. A tax-collector is told how much he must pay Rome in taxes for a given quadrant of the city. It's up to him to collect it. If he brings in less than required, he doesn't eat, but if he brings in more, it's his. And most of them brought in more – a lot more. So they're not only working for the enemy, but they're extorting their own people. Tax collectors were so despised and mistrusted that they could not serve as a witness in a trial. And their money was considered tainted by temple authorities, so they paid extra to convert their Roman coins into Jewish shekels. And even then, they couldn't go to worship past the gentile court anyway, so most didn't bother. Ask yourself: what does that kind of life do to a person's soul? Is money worth being cut off from your nation? I can't answer that, but I think for Matthew, there came a point where it wasn't worth it anymore.

The call story itself is one of the strangest. Jesus passes Matthew's booth, calls him to follow, and Matthew gets up and goes. That's all the information we get. Did they have a prior relationship? Given that Jesus seems to regularly eat and drink with tax-collectors, that's possible. But we're not told that, and we need to resist the urge to fill in the backstory. The point here is that Jesus calls us. We're never ready. We're never fully qualified. And we're rarely free of other responsibilities. Matthew is at work, for heaven's sake. He's not what anyone would call qualified or prepared. We can speculate about what might be going on within him, but in the end, we know only that he responded.

Rebecca Barlow Jordan tells a story about her friend Neil, who had just finished picking up his prescriptions at the drug store. As he drove home, he noticed a little Volkswagen Bug following closely behind him. To his surprise, the little car followed him right into his own driveway. Neil got out to confront the driver, only to discover there was no driver! It seems Neil had accidentally backed into this little car at the drug store and locked bumpers with it. The lightweight little car stayed stuck to his bumper for the whole drive home. Neil called the drug store just moments after the Volkswagen owner had called the police and reported his car stolen. [from Becky Freeman, Susan Duke, Rebecca Barlow Jordan, Gracie Malone, Fran Caffey Sandin. *Eggstra Courage for the Chicken-Hearted* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1999), pp. 64-65; as used in "Ready for a Change" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Matthew is like that little Volkswagen bug. Something connects for him, and he follows. And when the mainstream folks try to figure out why Jesus eats with the fringe, Jesus instructs them to learn

what it means for God to desire mercy over sacrifice. Lest you're wondering about that, let me remind you that Matthew sacrifices everything. Why? Because Jesus showed him mercy. Friends, God always starts with mercy. God always starts with a welcome, with accepting people where they are. God always starts with affirmation of our worth and our potential. Friends, and particularly our graduates this morning, follow what Jesus does here: he doesn't lead by highlighting flaws and weakness. He leads by leaning into their strengths. And Jesus isn't afraid of brokenness. We're all broken, every last one of us, somehow, some way. But Jesus, the Great Physician, heals the brokenness. And sometimes those broken places become our greatest strength.

So we meet Matthew and the tax-collectors on the fringe, and then we meet a leader. Mark and Luke tell this story also, but they give the leader a name – Jairus – and a position – leader of the synagogue. For them, the leader's daughter is ill, and time is of the essence, but not here. Here, our leader is presumably a secular leader, probably a gentile, and his daughter has already died. That's where we the fringe comes in. This leader is at the end of his rope, the edge of holding it together. Everything he values has been swallowed up in death. And yet, he believes deeply, saying to Jesus, "come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." While others scoff at Jesus' embrace of the fringe, he bows and he asks for the impossible. And Jesus goes with him.

And that's where we encounter the woman we discussed earlier – the one who touches the fringe on his cloak. She, too, is on the fringe – one excluded from the life of faith, not by her choices, but by circumstances beyond her control. She's hemorrhaging. We don't know why – cysts, tumors, ulcers, cancer – who can say. But the blood makes her ritually unclean, which in turn, makes it nearly impossible for her to access the ministries of the temple or the synagogue. She interrupts his journey to the Leader's daughter, just as she does in Mark and Luke. But unlike Mark and Luke, who describe Jesus as being surrounded by a crowd when he feels the power go out from him, Matthew makes no note of a crowd or a sense of power leaving him. Rather, he seems privy to the woman's inner dialogue. She believes the touch will heal, and he confirms her faith, and that is the moment when healing occurs for her.

Her story is a fringe story. It's not the main thrust of the action, it's a sideline; a tangent, and interruption. Henri Nouwen once pointed out that ministry happens in the interruptions. Matthew is at work when Jesus calls him to follow. Jesus is teaching when the Leader bows to ask for resurrection. And Jesus is on his way there when this woman touches him and is healed. How often do we go home, frustrated, and complain that we didn't get anything done today. I'll freely admit that I've done that. I have a to-do list, and there are days I don't check off a single thing. Because the phone and the visits and the emails and the texts and the person at my door, "have you got a minute?" And I confess now that sometimes my answer is "only a minute!" Until I remember that ministry happens in the interruptions.

There's an old story about a seminary professor who decided to experiment on some of those he was training for ministry. He informed his class that they were being asked to deliver a surprise sermon. Each student was given a sheet of paper with their assigned scripture lesson and when they had to present the sermon. What the students didn't know is that while they all were given the same scripture lesson, they did not all receive the same instructions. Some were told to be ready to preach across campus at the chapel in one hour. Pulling a sermon together in one hour is not an easy task. I'm an experienced preacher, and my sermons take 10-15 hours of preparation, so you can imagine how those students responded. Others in the class received instructions to be ready to preach at class next week, but to report across campus at the chapel in an hour for further instructions.

Meanwhile, the professor hired an actor to sit outside in the campus center where he would certainly encounter these preachers-in-training and pretend to be injured. You can probably guess what happened. Only one of those students assigned to preach in one hour stopped to help. But nearly all the students who had a week to prepare did stop to help. [original source unknown; classic story.] Ministry happens in the interruptions, but only if we're paying attention, only if we're not rushed. Friends, ask yourselves: when was the last time you were interrupted? If you can't remember, why is that? What are you doing to make sure you take time in a day to breathe, to look around you, to not rush through the day? If you can't remember, maybe that merits your attention?

So often, people say to me, "I know you're busy" as if they have to rush through what they want to tell me. And yes, I'm busy. There is never a day in my life that I don't have a to-do list. I put off that to-do list sometimes in the interest of self-care, and I put it off sometimes because I need to take care of someone else. But that to-do list is always there. And I juggle a lot of balls in the air, and sometimes I drop them, and sometimes people get hurt. And sometimes, I hate how busy this work makes me. I hate hurting people; letting people down. But you know what? Sometimes I'm grateful for how busy this work is. Sometimes, I'm grateful for that to-do list because it keeps me busy and gives me the out to avoid the deeper and harder work I truly need to be doing way down in my spirit. And you know what I mean because you do it too. We all do. Our world has mastered busy work. Which is why lessons like this in scripture speak to us so powerfully. Jesus didn't seem to get lost in the to-do list. His prayer life helped him stay centered on who he was rather than what he needed to do. And because he stayed centered on who he was, he never met an interruption – he only encountered people. And he took the time to see who they were. And he was present in the moment. He didn't live on the fringes. He lived centered in the now. Which is a wondrous thing, given that so much of what he taught was pointing us to a world that didn't yet exist – a world that was kinder, gentler, more peaceable and more just.

He didn't live on the fringes, but he ministered there. To the people on the fringes of what was socially acceptable, to the people on the fringes of holding it all together, to people on the fringes of meaninglessness and death-like existences – those were his people. And they were his ministry: dignity, healing, wholeness, new life, vision.

Which brings us to our last two figures – two men who are blind asking for mercy. That's interesting, isn't it? They don't ask for healing. They ask for mercy. Which Jesus has already told us is God's preference. The healing is assumed. Jesus asks, "Do you have faith that I can do this? Let it be done according to your faith." Don't let that get twisted up friends. A lot of people hear that and assume that healing will happen if I have enough faith. Miracles will happen if I have enough faith. And if those things don't happen, then I must not have had enough faith, or so we tell ourselves. But that's not a good or a healthy interpretation of what's happening here. This isn't about doing things right. This isn't about doing at all. This is about understanding who we are, who we're created to be. This is about seeing the gifts God's given; see ourselves in the light of God's vision. Which takes us back full circle. We're never ready. We're never fully qualified. And we're rarely free of other responsibilities. We all broken. But we are all recipients of mercy, and God always starts with mercy. God always starts with a welcome, with accepting people where they are. God always starts with affirmation of our worth and our potential. That's where God starts. And that is where God centers us. And then God draws the circle wider, wider, wider, until the fringes are subsumed in the light of grace, until our eyes open to see God and one another by that same light of grace; until we trust that grace in the fringe moments; until we learn to sing, even at the fringes of our own limits, it is well, it is well with my soul. Amen.