

Have you ever felt like you were on the outside, looking in?
Have you ever felt not, quite, wanted?

There was once someone awakened by his mom. "You have to get up now. You have to get up and go to church now."

"I don't want to."

"It doesn't matter that you don't want you. You have to get up and go to church. It is Sunday."

"I don't want to go. They don't like me at church."

"Ridiculous. Get up. Get out of bed and go to church."

"I don't want to. They don't like me. They are mean to me at church. Tell me one good reason why I should go?"

"You have to go to church. You are the pastor."

I love that story. Thank you for liking me here. But I have served a church where I haven't been liked and it was hard to get out of bed on Sunday's knowing that I would have to lead worship and preach to a congregation where I didn't feel liked or welcomed.

That was when I felt like an outsider. It was hard feeling that way. Have you ever felt like you were an outsider? Have you ever felt not wanted?

I have walked into a room full of people who didn't like me. And I knew they didn't like me. It was hard to walk into the room. I had a pit in my stomach, as I felt as though others were staring knives into me. I felt like an outsider. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like an outsider, not really wanted?

If you have felt that way, then you might know how Matthew may have felt. Matthew, we are told, is a tax collector.

Tax collectors in Jesus' time were not liked at all. They were seen as collaborators with a foreign, occupying government. They were excluded from the religious life of the community. They were excluded, often from their own families. It was a tough, lonely job.

But one in which you could get wealthy doing, which is why people were attracted to it. Even though Matthew may have been doing well financially, he knew what it was like to feel excluded. He knew what it was like to be on the outside, looking in.

When Jesus came along, he looked at this tax collector and saw something different that many in the rest of that society had seen. He saw a child of God. He saw someone loved by God.

His invitation to Matthew, "Why don't you come and follow me?" Was a compelling one to Matthew. It was one of the first times that someone had reached out to him and welcomed him. And he jumped at the opportunity to be a part of the community again.

We live in a world, where there are many people who feel as if they are on the outside, looking in. We live in a world where loneliness and isolation are problems.

It is easy for us to get so caught up in our world, doing the things we do. We work hard. We take care of our families. We keep our clothes clean. We are diligent at getting necessary tasks done. But I wonder do we keep ourselves so busy that we miss seeing those who are hurting and lonely around us? Do we keep ourselves so busy that we miss seeing those who feel as if they are on the outside, looking in?

I know for certain that you are people with a good heart. Because you have been so very good to me and to our family in our time of hurting and pain, in the aftermath of Whitney's death and Isaac's incarceration. But I wonder what can we do as a church and as individuals within this congregation to reach out to those who may not be as obviously hurting as I am?

Can we have a week of missions, where every one who is a member here or attends here, offers themselves to one task of ministry or mission for the week? Just think of what we could do if we would offer to visit a homebound person? Just think of what we could do if we could help build a house for Habitat for Humanity? Just think of what we could do if we could reach out to our neighbor who is Hispanic and help them get by in a different country? Just think of what we could do for a family whose main bread winner is out of work? Just think of what we could do if we took Jesus' words and actions seriously in this passage to reach out to those who are outcast and show them God's love and grace?

Ultimately, this passage is about Jesus reaching out to us, to anyone who has ever felt like they are on the outside looking in, to remind us that we are loved by God. The challenge is for us to put that message into action in our lives.

There was once a missionary bishop who celebrated the confirmation for a group of severely handicapped children. They were all institutionalized, and none of them was capable of even the simplest kind of academic work. The chaplain of the home warned the bishop not to speak for more than two or three minutes; anything more would be beyond their capability. He was also asked to avoid any highfalutin' language.

The bishop was quite nervous about what he would say. He spoke this message to the children. "Dear children, your Mom and Dad and brothers and sisters all love you. That's why they gently

stroke your head, your hair and your cheeks. And that's what happens when you are confirmed. The Good Lord gently strokes you because he loves you so much. So when I make the sign of the cross on your forehead with the holy oil, our dear Lord is stroking and caressing you."

A few minutes later, as he touched a cerebral palsy victim's forehead, the little boy's face grimaced in a little contortion, and with great difficulty he said the word, "stroke," while the saliva spilled out of his mouth. His mother gently wiped away the saliva and her tears with the very same handkerchief. The boy had gotten the message. God loved him. God was stroking him.

This story and this passage are a reminder to us, that God loves us. God is stroking us. No matter who we are.

And as people of God in our world today, it is up to us, to find a way to share that love with others, even those who are on the outside, looking in. May God help us live lives of faith.

Amen