

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

LINEAR TRANSGRESSIONS

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5)

Analysis by Jerome Burce

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; 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 him 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 he 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 come to call not the righteous but sinners."

[14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' 15 And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. 17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.']

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue 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 hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, 21 for she said 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 instantly the woman was made well. 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 throughout that district.

Notes on the text:

"Suddenly," v. 18, 20 is a poor turning of the Greek "idou," lit. "Look!" (KJV, "Behold"). Matthew loves this word. He uses it 63 times, invariably as a way of saying to the hearer, "OK, heads up, this is significant." "Idou" shows up also in v. 10 of the present text: "As he sat at dinner...Look!—lots of tax collectors and sinners came..." One wonders why the NRSV editors chose to ignore it at this point.

"Those who are sick," v. 12: Lit. "Those having evil [things/stuff]," i.e. persons of whom an American might say "They've got it bad."

"Made well," vv. 21, 22: the Greek word is a form of "sozo," i.e. save, or rescue. One wonders too why the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary chopped vv. 14-17 from the appointed reading for the day. Doing so skews the meaning of v. 18a and disrupts Matthew's progression of thought. Suggestion to preachers: read and use the whole thing.

DIAGNOSIS: Lines Drawn

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Don't Touch!*

Look! Look! Look!, Matthew barks (vv. 10, 18, 20; see Note 1). Each time he points us to a person or persons who have got it real bad, so to speak (v. 12; see Note 2), whether morally (tax collectors and sinners), physically (a bleeding woman) or ontologically (a dead girl). Whence cometh their help? Not, for sure, from me, from you, or from the other people around them, all of whom, like us, are all too busy not looking. How come? Because some sights we can't fix and therefore can't bear—"Quick, bury that child, ignore that woman!"—and at others our only thought is to scold. Some things we won't do: we won't touch the corpse (cf. v. 25); we won't let the dirty invalid touch us (cf. v. 20); we won't sit down for a convivial lunch with the crooks and rascals (cf. v. 10). Still less will we let our children play with their foul-mouthed brats. It wouldn't be right for our kids. They might turn bad themselves. By the way, one reason Matthew barks is that he's on to our tricks. He knows too well the rules and devices of separation that right-minded people swear by. One can only presume that he suffered them himself (v. 9). One wonders what he'd make of certain such devices in U.S. churches—shot-glass communion, for example, or rigid membership rolls.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Grim Expectations*

Avoidance, say John's disciples, is a benchmark of the righteousness that they and the Pharisees practice (v. 14). And this, of course, is the righteousness on which hearts are chiefly fixed today, also where Jesus' disciples are concerned. Let's call it what it is: a deficient righteousness, or, more sharply, a righteousness that isn't right enough. How so?

Because it lacks the oomph, the nerve, the flat-out authority (cf. 7:29) to make things right that have first gone wrong. But then who, living with wide-open eyes in the only world we know, dares really to believe that things gone bad—salt, let's say, or erstwhile salty persons (5:13)—can ever be restored? Can cancer be cured, or damaged hearts made whole? Of course not. Hence the recent rise of the “wellness” cult or the publication of permanent sex-offender lists, examples in the secular realm of the same little “r” righteousness that plays one game only, namely defense, the aim being to keep things as right as possible for as long as possible for me and the people around me who are still relatively undamaged. That usually means finding a coach, a savant, a self-help book that will help me do that. It always means drawing lines that good guys don't cross. As for those on the other side of the lines we draw, too bad for them.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Impossible! (Version 1)

Actually, says God, too bad for you all. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” i.e. engagement, not avoidance (v. 13). And from you in particular—he speaks here through Jesus to Jesus' disciples, those presuming like Matthew to follow him—I want a big “R” Righteousness, one that “exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees,” else no kingdom for you (5:20). Pray tell, is there a disciple alive who hears this without quaking? It is, of course, an impossible demand, one that I for one will be meeting about the time that thistles grow figs (7:16) or camels start squeezing themselves through that needle's eye (19:24). Sure, there are dodges. One can pretend he didn't say it. Or, like the crowd at the dead girl's house, one can laugh at Jesus for having said it (v. 24a; thus too the high-minded mockery of those who dismiss miracle as an essential aspect of Jesus' ministry). Or again, like the slave with the one talent, one can tuck the high demand away and, with pious fingers crossed, go

about one's usual business of keeping oneself as righteous (little "r") as possible, hoping against hope that the master won't mind (25:24-25); hoping too that he won't notice how I've pulled the Pharisees' stunt of reducing his line-crossing savior (1:21) to nothing more than a line-enforcing "teacher" (v. 11), another Moses, perhaps, as in most bad readings of Matthew. Sorry, here's where the Master draws his own grim line and parts with me. "Be gone! I never knew you!" (7:23).

PROGNOSIS: Lines Crossed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Impossible!
(Version 2)

Yet miracle of miracle: turns out that this master of the ultimate parting shot is also the author and instigator of that other Righteousness, the capital "R" kind, the one that insists on crossing every conceivable line for the sake of those on the other side, the ones who've got it bad. That includes the lines that he himself has drawn, however deep, fierce, and final they may be. Steered by Matthew's threefold bark we get today to watch his warm-up act: three lines crossed, three species of the untouchable saved by a presence, a touch, so perfectly right that it makes them all right, whether morally, physically, or yes, ontologically. Comes at length the ultimate Transgression: the Son of God spiked to a spot where he has no business being, hanging there not only for the sake of the crooks he hangs between but for the saving too of the righteous (little "r") rascals who are laughing at him from below (27:41-42) on what they foolishly think is the safe side of the line. He dies, of course. In the process he presents his Father with a double whammy of desires fulfilled, the ultimate mercy and the ultimate sacrifice (cf. v. 13). No wonder Day Three finds this Jesus raised from the dead—made right, in other words, and supremely so, vested with "all authority" to push his Righteousness across all lines into "all nations" (28:28-29). How will he do that?

Astoundingly, through bad disciples who too easily gave up on him (26:56) and still don't get him (28:17).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Slim Hopes*

Then again, what Jesus counts on is that you and I will be either curious or desperate enough to keep giving him a whirl. That's what happens in the present account: the rascals come and sit with him (v. 10), the father grovels and begs him (v. 18), the invalid sneaks up on him (v. 20). How kind of Jesus to call this "faith," as indeed he does (v. 22). So think of faith as the slightest crack of permission or opportunity that invites Jesus to cross the line into nasty places and to wretches stuck there in their callous sin, their endless bleeding, their grievous dying. Once there he fixes the unfixable, or he promises to do so just as surely as he got fixed himself on Easter Day. Then, as with the woman, he turns a round and gives us the lion's share of credit for making this possible. Where this happens, and especially where it happens consistently, there people are known, lots of them, to start dreaming of a Righteousness bigger and better by far than the little "r" kind they've been working so hard to conserve. This new one plays offense. It works miracles as a matter of course, not least the miracle of Christ with them and for them in the blessed sacrament. It grants them license to quit fretting over the rightness they manifest (or not) in and of themselves, Christ being so perfectly all right that he's perfectly right for them. So it is that bit by bit, in fits and starts, their instinct to avoid starts fading in favor of a newfound urge to pass the promise along. Good for them!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Hugs and Handshakes All Around*

And wouldn't you know, that newfound urge starts pushing these disciples to transgress lines they wouldn't otherwise have dared to cross. "Follow me," says line-crossing Jesus, and so they do

(v. 9). Hence the flow of missionaries that has marked the church from its Pentecost beginning and still marks it. Hence too the works of mercy, the institutions of charity, the ministries in prison and hospital, on army base and college campus. A teenager I know, spent her Easter week in Haiti. Of persons I'd have picked for that adventure, she'd have been the last. Old instincts die hard, of course. In the congregation this child belongs to, lines still get drawn. A tattered, smelly person walking in on a Sunday morning will draw frowns and stares, nor would I be surprised to catch a disciple or two sliding unhappily to the far end of the pew the smelly person plopped into. But after that would come discussion, and with it, perhaps, some shame and repentance. And then the restoration, the peace of Christ passed all around to makes us right all over again, right for each other, right for the stranger that will cross my path or yours tomorrow. Right enough to make the other perfectly all right through a newfound hope in Christ, that sliver of faith Jesus will use to break through and save her. Right enough to laugh out loud together as Christians will do even in the teeth of death, or especially then. For the Bridegroom waits, and we're his guests (v. 15). Let the party begin!