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Mercy

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Text: Matthew 9:9–13 (A - Pentecost 3)

One day Jesus came by. He stepped into my office and said, “Cliff, come with me. It’s mealtime.”

So I said, “Uh... well, things are a little busy here, but OK, Jesus. I’ll just pack a few things in my briefcase....”

I quickly pulled together a few of my most important books and put them into my briefcase. Then, hoping Jesus wouldn’t notice, I patted my breast pocket to make sure I had my pen. I looked up at Jesus. He was standing at the doorway, smiling.

“Come on, Cliff. The table is spread and waiting. And we’ve got a few stops to make along the way.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by “a few stops along the way”. For that matter, I wasn’t entirely sure just what this meal was all about, or where it was going to be held. But I quickly locked the office door and the front door of the church behind me (for, after all, I am a responsible kind of a guy), and followed Jesus out onto Nelson Avenue.

We walked over to the Royal Oak Skytrain Station. Jesus looked at the ticket vending machines, frowned a little, and patted parts of his tunic. I quickly said, “Here, Jesus—let me get the tickets. You can repay me the favour some day.” He looked at me and smiled. Soon we were riding the train westward.

I kind of lost track of where we went. I was busy talking with Jesus. I had a lot of things to ask him about. Somehow, though, he managed to get a lot more from me than I got from him. Time and again, I would realize with surprise that we were talking about me and how my life was going. Anyway,

I was so engrossed in our conversation that at one particular stop (just which one, I'm not sure), Jesus had to tug on my arm and motion for me to follow him. I frantically grabbed for my briefcase with one hand, checked my breast pocket with the other, and made it out the door just as the warning bell sounded.

Still we continued talking. I was really into this. There were so many things I wanted to understand. So again I didn't really notice what route we took. But somewhere along the way, we must have entered a building and taken an elevator at least several floors up. For the next time I took any notice of our surroundings, we were in the waiting room of an office suite. A receptionist sat behind a very expensive-looking desk. Several steps away there was a door. And on the door there was a sign which read, "The Honourable Jane Dough, Member of Parliament".

I barely stifled a snicker. "Jane Dough." Dough was spelled D-O-U-G-H. "Member of Parliament". That was a good one.

Jesus approached the desk and told the receptionist that we'd like to see the MP. I couldn't hear their words very clearly, but it seemed apparent that Jesus was not getting what he wanted. He turned around, smiling, and walked over to me. "Cliff, I can't seem to convince the receptionist that she should let us see Mrs. Dough. Do you want to give it a try?"

I wasn't sure that I would be any more successful, but I went to the desk and identified myself to the receptionist. She asked me if I had a business card. I blushed. "Well, no not yet. We're working on that, though. Look, I think that it's fairly important that we talk to the Honourable Mrs. Dough. Please ask her if she'll see us."

I don't know why, but the receptionist complied after I returned to the other side of the room. She looked up at me and smiled and said that Mrs. Dough would see us in just a few moments. I thanked her.

I turned to Jesus. "Look Jesus, I'm really sorry about how that woman treated you."

"Oh, it wasn't much, really. I've had worse." He massaged his hands a little.

I was quiet for a moment, trying to decide whether I should ask him what I really wanted to ask him. Finally, I blurted it

out. "Jesus, why did you take that from her? Why should you, the Lord of Life, have to stand for the petty bureaucracy of an MP's receptionist? Surely you could have just gotten your way by snapping your fingers or something."

Jesus drawled through a little grin, "Well, yeah, I guess I could have. But I don't operate that way."

The receptionist called to us and, with a smile, ushered us through the door into the office's inner sanctum. Just as we entered, the Honourable Jane Dough, Member of Parliament, stood up at her desk. She was a handsome woman—expensively dressed, her hair stylishly coiffed, her face expertly made-up. She welcomed us to sit, then sat down herself, folding her manicured hands on the padded leather desktop. In a practiced but pleasant tone, she then asked us what she could do for us.

Jesus spoke. "I'm hosting a banquet. Come and eat with me."

Mrs. Dough started a little. But her voice remained poised and measured as she said, "My, that's very kind of you. Usually such engagements are booked through my constituency secretary, so I would appreciate it if you were to speak with him. But would you mind telling me the nature of the occasion? Is it the opening of a convention or an important civic anniversary or something like that?"

Jesus said, "No, nothing like that. Just dinner at my place... now."

Mrs. Dough hesitated for just an instant, and then excused herself, and called up her receptionist on the phone. I pulled on Jesus' sleeve and led him to the far corner of the room.

"Jesus, what are you doing inviting a politician to your meal? She and her kind are destroying the country! On the one hand, they're driving us into deeper and deeper national debt. At the same time, they keep raising taxes. People all over this country are getting really upset. They're angry! They're afraid that what they've worked hard for all their lives is just ending up in the hands of opportunists and users and politicians like that slick one over there. Jesus, I'm really confused. How could you possibly invite the likes of Jane Dough to your table? She and all the other tax-grabbers have betrayed us!"

While I said all this, Jesus had continued smiling, and yet his expression did change. His grin wasn't quite so broad and

it seemed as if a touch of sadness pulled his brows just a little lower. "Ah, Cliff: you and your people are living in the richest generation in all of history. Never have people enjoyed such tremendous wealth. You deserve everything you get, including the governments you elect and the taxes you pay. After all, you can afford them, can't you?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose we can... but that's not the point, Jesus! How could you possibly invite a tax-grabber to your table? She's a traitor! They all are!"

By now, Jesus' smile had faded. He looked at me intently, yet sadly. And he spoke just one word: "Mercy".

Just then the Honourable Jane Dough, MP, called out from behind her desk, "Good news, gentlemen: I've cleared off my schedule!" She grabbed an expensive leather handbag out of the closet, smiled brightly at Jesus and me, and led the way out of the room. Jesus, smiling fully once again, followed her.

Still stunned by Jesus' invitation as well as by the woman's compliance, I stood frozen to the spot for several seconds, and then scrambled to catch up. As we departed the outer office, the automatic closer softly snicked the door shut behind me. We were out on the street again. Jesus and the politician were deep in conversation. I followed. I couldn't believe how fast they were moving. I had to struggle to keep up.

I don't know how long we walked or how far, but I was suddenly aware that we were now in a residential section of the city. Although the houses weren't really elaborate, I knew that this must be a fairly pricey part of town. Jesus suddenly turned aside, opened a gate for the woman, who flashed a perfectly orthodontic smile at him and then entered a neat domestic yard. He looked back my way and smiled at me as I scrambled to catch up.

"Cliff, are you still following?" There was a hint of a laugh in his voice—as if there were something funny about the situation or as if he had just made a bit of a joke. As I entered the yard, I unconsciously patted my breast pocket, as I often do. Whew; my pen was still there, as it should be. Then I suddenly realized that I no longer had my briefcase. A wave of anxiety washed over me. I must have left it in the MP's office. I started to say something to Jesus, but he was already on his way up the front step and reaching for the doorbell.

The door was opened by a pleasant looking man in his mid-thirties. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him. Jesus spoke. "Hi. Come and eat with us."

With an expression of suspicion, the man looked back and forth between Jesus and Mrs. Jane Dough, both of whom were beaming from ear-to-ear. Then he spied me, behind them and several steps down. He looked at me closely for a few seconds, his face brightened, and then he said, "It's Pastor Reinhardt, isn't it? Gee, it's good to see you, pastor. Maybe you don't remember me. I'm John Altwasser. You baptized our son two years ago."

"Oh, yes—John Altwasser. It's good to see you again." I indeed recognized him, but as I reached out to shake his extended hand, I couldn't help thinking to myself that I would have recognized him a lot quicker if he had bothered to show up in church even just once since the day of the baptism. On the other hand, maybe that fit in well with his name: Altwasser... Old Water.

My presence apparently helped John to relax his guard, for he welcomed us into the house. As Mrs. Dough gracefully seated herself on a living room chair and began to talk about nothing with polished ease, I took Jesus aside once again.

"Jesus, are you sure you know what you're doing? Sure enough, I baptized his infant son a couple of years ago, but he and his wife and the kid haven't shown up in church since. And Jesus, there's something more you ought to know: he and his wife used to do a little grass back then. They told me when I came to visit. I had asked them what that smell was in the house, so they told me. What's more, neither so much as flinched when they informed me. Jesus, they have no sense of right and wrong. That baptism was little more than a family ritual for them. The Altwassers are users. They use grass; they use the church; and—if the truth be known—I feel as though they used me, a pastor of your church and a servant of your Father."

Jesus paused a moment, looking thoughtfully over at Altwasser. He looked back at me, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Sounds like they could use me."

His playfulness wasn't entirely lost on me, but it seemed as if my agenda had already been set. I could only hiss at him: "How could you possibly invite them to your meal?"

Once again Jesus' smile was replaced by a piercing intentness which made me squirm. He opened his mouth and once again spoke only one word: "Mercy".

Then John called out to him. "Jesus, I'd love to come to your meal." John and Mrs. Dough had been chatting in the living room, and now they both looked at us, John's face open and expectant as I had always remembered it, and Mrs. Dough's exhibiting that winning smile which no doubt had helped propel her into office.

Jesus spoke. "That's great, John! Let's go!"

John replied, "OK. I just need to write a note to my wife. She and our son have gone out for the day, and they'll be back this evening. Hmm. Let's see, a pen... where is there a pen?"

Before I was even aware of it, Jesus reached over to me, pulled my pen out of my shirt-pocket, and tossed it over to John.

As John scribbled a note, Mrs. Dough came and linked her arm in mine, and led me to the front door. We were already halfway to the front gate when Jesus and Altwasser closed the house door behind them. As we left the yard and started down the public sidewalk once again, I suddenly noticed that Mrs. Dough no longer had her expensive handbag. I grinned a little to myself. Bought with taxpayers' money, no doubt. Now it was in the living room of that user of people's good graces, John Altwasser.

But my gloating gave way to a wave of anxiety as I realized, even without patting my breast pocket, that my pen was also left behind.

Now Jesus led the way while we three followed, I in the centre, flanked on either side by Dough and Altwasser. I was in kind of a daze. I was glad that the MP still had her arm linked in mine, for I felt a little light-headed. I had no idea where we were, or where we were going.

Just how long we continued, I couldn't say. We changed direction several times, and I didn't recognize any of the streets. Finally, we came to a rundown building which sort of resembled a rural community hall.

Jesus opened the door for us, and we entered a long, broad hallway with doors leading off on each side. Jesus led the way down to the end. Space and time seemed to be a little

distorted. It looked as if the end of the hallway was a long way off, and yet we reached it almost instantly.

Once again, Jesus opened the door. Jane Dough gasped in surprise as John Altwasser licked his lips expectantly. The room was filled with a table which stretched out beyond the limits of my vision. It was loaded with food. On either side of it, people were taking their places, seating themselves in chairs which somehow seemed reserved for them and for them alone.

Even though each person was unique, there was something about them all which suggested to me that each one was a bit of a clone. Each one was either a Dough—a tax-grabber, a national traitor—or an Altwasser—a user of conveniences, a user of God.

As John and Jane rushed forward eagerly to find their places at Jesus' table, I reeled a little once again with dizziness. Jesus reached out his hand and steadied me. His grasp on my arm calmed me a little, and I finally found my voice.

"It's all fantastic, Jesus! I can't believe it! It's wonderful!"

Jesus smiled. "Come." He gestured toward the incredible table.

I knew immediately and with utmost certainty that there indeed was a place for me at Jesus' table, but instead of doing as Jesus bid me, for the third time I gave expression to the outrage which was now boiling over inside of me.

"Jesus, this just isn't right! These people are profaning your table! They're nothing but a bunch of tax-grabbers and users. They don't care about the broader community; they don't care about your church. They don't care about repentance and restitution and making things right with your Father in heaven!"

Jesus looked at me intently, yet his smile remained as full as ever. "What do you care about, Cliff?"

"I care about responsibility. I care about commitment. I care about righteousness."

Jesus spoke again, this time softly, tenderly. "A tremendous sacrifice, my friend. I like that. But I want you to learn this: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. And that's precisely why there's a place at my table even for you."

His arm was still stretched out in a welcoming gesture. His palm was turned slightly upward, enabling me to see a small, circular scar.

The table had become silent. All eyes were turned on me. My head was spinning; I tottered in dizziness. With a sob of both pain and relief, I sagged into Jesus' arms. I suffered the pain of tremendous loss—loss of everything. And I was relieved of my burden by the holiness of Jesus' mercy, who then half-carried me, half-dragged me to the table of traitors and users—to Jesus' table of mercy.

And there I took my place.