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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

### **“An Unlikely Crew”**

Last Thursday the tele-evangelist Pat Robertson died at the age of 93. For more than a half-century, Robertson was a familiar presence in American living rooms, known for his “700 Club” television show and Church Broadcasting Network. Ralph Reed, who ran the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, said in a press release that Robertson was a “happy warrior”. “He was not some backwoods preacher,” Reed said. “He was very enthralling, avuncular (uh-vunc-u-ler) and charming. He had a great sense of humor.”

Really, Ralph? Because here are some of the things Robertson said:

About adultery:

“Males have a tendency to wander a little bit. And what you want to do is make a home so wonderful he doesn’t want to wander.”

About a husband whose wife has Alzheimer’s disease:

“I know it sounds cruel, but if he’s going to do something, he should divorce her and start all over again, but to make sure she has custodial care and somebody (is) looking after her.”

When asked what about the “Till death do us part” part of the marriage vow, he said Alzheimer’s is “a kind of death.”

On Walt Disney World’s “Gay Days”:

“I would warn Orlando that you’re right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don’t think I’d be waving those flags in God’s face if I were you ... It’ll bring about terrorist bombs; it’ll bring earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor.”

On the role of a man and a woman:

“I know this is painful for the ladies to hear, but if you get married, you have accepted the headship of a man, your husband. Christ is the head of the

household, and the husband is the head of the wife, and that's the way it is, period."

On feminism:

"The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."

On the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake that killed an estimated 250,000 people (and injured another 300,000):

"They were under the heel of the French, you know, Napoleon the third and whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, 'We will serve you if you will get us free from the prince.' True story.

And so the devil said, 'OK, it's a deal.' And they kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got themselves free. But ever since they have been cursed by one thing after another."

One of his many statements on homosexuality:

"Many of those people involved in Adolf Hitler were Satanists. Many were homosexuals. The two things seem to go together."

On assassinating Hugo Chavez (for which he later apologized):

"You know, I don't know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we're trying to assassinate him, I think that we really ought to go ahead and do it."

On the tornadoes that ravaged the Midwest in 2012:

"If enough people were praying, (God) would've intervened. You could pray. Jesus stilled the storm. You can still storms."

None of those quotes sound very . . . what was it Ralph Reed said . . . charming and avuncular (or very fit for a Christian), to me; do they to you?

Over lunch on Thursday, my husband Terry asked me, "What do you think Jesus said to Pat when he got to the proverbial pearly gates?" Without skipping a beat I said, "Go away. You don't belong here." But after a moment of reflection I said,

“Actually, Jesus probably said, come on in.” Which – makes me sick to my stomach to say. But if I’m going to take Jesus’ side on Sundays and declare that the love of Christ and the grace of God meet all people, regardless of their decisions, their lifestyles, or where they may be on their faith journeys (contrary to what Pat Robertson said), I need to find myself on that side the other 6 days of the week, too. Otherwise, I’m really no better than Pat Robertson or the Pharisees, and I know my Bible well enough to know that I probably don’t want to be them.

Preaching on the passage from Matthew that we just heard, the one about Jesus calling Matthew, eating with the riff-raff, and healing women and girls, requires both honesty and humility, because it’s far easier to look back at the apparent foolishness of the Pharisees than it is to look around and recognize that we ask the very same things. Why them? Why him? Why not us? Why not me? Pat Robertson said some really horrific, unChristian and mean things and that should matter. Right?

Well, not so fast, Jesus might say.

Jesus is walking along when he sees Matthew sitting at his tax booth and says to him “Follow me.” It’s not clear whether this is a command or an invitation, but it doesn’t seem to matter because Matthew gets up and goes.

It’s a bit ironic that Matthew’s old life is just hours old when following Jesus lands him back with the company he used to keep at a dinner Jesus has with tax collectors and sinners. The mantle of his new vocation is so fresh that he must have blended in as one of the social and moral outcasts at the table, and for all we know some of them could have been friends and colleagues. This is when the Pharisees ask how it is that Jesus is eating with such noxious people.

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” they ask. But don’t be fooled; their questions don’t arise from curiosity, wonder, or a genuine desire to learn or understand – because the Pharisees are none of those things. No, their questions arise from good old fashioned prejudice – they don’t believe any of those people are acceptable. Simply put, those who are righteous according to the law (of which they consider themselves to be) do not break bread with those who are outside the law. And tax collectors are chief among the unrighteous.

Why? Well, tax collectors were known to be corrupt and in cahoots with the Romans, collecting taxes from the occupied to give to the occupier. And they often profited off their collecting by skimming a little off the top for themselves. They were, in the words of one commentator, radically despised. So for Jesus to not only associate with them but also call one as a disciple was completely outside of what was socially and religiously acceptable.

Could this be why the disciples are silent when the Pharisees question them? Maybe. After all, what Jesus is doing here turns the establishment on its head. Because nowhere does the Gospel writer say that Jesus required repentance and conversion of these sinners before eating a meal with them. Scandalous! What would Pat Robertson say? Calling people without condition? Blasphemous! But then again, Jesus knew something Pat didn't seem to know, and that is that Jesus, who perfectly embodied God's love, knew that the source of conversion is always unconditional love, and never condemnation. Any transformation of this colorful crew would be the result of loving acceptance and trusting communion. Go figure.

But never fear, Jesus steps in and answers the Pharisees' question with a curve ball they never expected: Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

How dare Jesus flout the clean categories of righteous and unrighteous and turn their world upside down! But those poor Pharisees, what they don't seem to understand in this ironic reversal is that they are some of the sick, too.

You know, people like Pat Robertson always assume that it's everyone else who is sick and in need of a physician. I mean, just look at the people and groups he demonized through the years: women, gay folks, Haitians, people of color, those living with AIDS, drug dealers and addicts – there really weren't many who he didn't exclude. But do you think it ever occurred to Pat that he might be in need of a physician, too? The problem with a story like this is that we always want to automatically assume that we are not tax collectors and sinners. But as soon as we make that assumption, we're just like the Pharisees: too self-righteous for our own good. And too full of pride and hubris to understand that we need God's graceful mercy, too.

See, declaring one's self righteous before Jesus is to make a claim that no one can ever sustain, because we're all sinners. But the sinner who understands her need is different than the sinner who claims no need of assistance, because the former welcomes Jesus into her life while the latter slams shut the door of hospitality.

And here is where the story about the woman and the girl who are sick, the one that Matthew tells on the heels of Jesus eating with riff-raff, comes into play.

Illness is the great leveler. It makes no difference if we're rich or poor, whether we're at the center of power or at the margins. Illness disrupts lives, and with long-term illnesses, anyone can lose hope. In Matthew's story, two people are battling illness: a leader of the synagogue who seeks out Jesus for his daughter, and a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. These two people would not associate with one another if they were healthy. The male leader would be highly unlikely to associate with a woman, let alone one with a hemorrhage. But their distress places them in the same story, even in the same crowd, and they're both seeking a physician. They seek a healer to do what they have no power to do on their own.

When the leader of the synagogue – a man who by all accounts is as healthy and successful as they come – when he approaches Jesus, he does so as a man who recognizes that his power and influence can only go so far. And not only that, but even the woman interrupting him doesn't seem to concern him, even though a man of his stature might expect Jesus to pay him more attention than her. But maybe at that moment he sees in the face of the woman a fellow sufferer, and that's all he needs to let go of any vanity or self-righteousness he may feel, because here, where all other pretenses are stripped away, they are equals.

Try as we might to remedy our illness on our own, at some point we realize that our knowledge and expertise is not enough; or more to the point for Pat Robertson, that his cis male whiteness isn't enough. That even the healthy need a physician. Because illness is the great leveler.

So what do you think Jesus said to Pat at the proverbial pearly gates? A colleague of mine posted online that she thinks Jesus made him take a seat on the bench and think about all the awful things he said when he was alive. At first that struck

me as a little Pharisaic. But on reflection, maybe Jesus did tell him to get in line to see the doctor, and when he finally saw the doctor she wrote him a big fat prescription that said things like “love one another” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto to you” and “judge not lest ye be judged” and to do all those things because Pat, you’re in need of some serious healing. So come on in, but take your medicine. Because in here, all are welcome at the table. In here, we break together and share in conversation; we trust one another, and dissolve boundaries of every kind. We extend the love of God to all our sisters and brothers, regardless of what you may think. So come on in, but take your medicine, because everyone, you included, is a sinner in need of a physician.

Amen.

Sources:

Commentary on Matthew 9:8-13 and 18-26 from Feasting on the Word, Volume 3, Year A and Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 1, Chapters 1-13