

“Doctor”

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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I need a doctor. I need to find myself a doctor.

We’ve been settling in here in our new home of Mason, Michigan, going through all the hoops and hurdles that anybody has to go through when they move to a new home in a new state: setting up telephone and internet service; letting friends, family members, magazines we subscribe to, and everybody else we do business with know where to find us; learning the local geography and culture; setting up new car insurance; getting new drivers’ licenses and vehicle registrations; establishing a new bank account; transferring health insurance. On and on it goes, a seemingly endless list of “things that have to be done.” On the whole, we’ve been doing pretty well; most of those major tasks have now been completed, though we’re still trying to prove to the Secretary of State office that my wife really is a resident of the state of Michigan and that she is therefore entitled to a Michigan driver’s license!

Now, it’s time for me to find myself a doctor. A general practitioner; someone I can see for regular checkups, illnesses, and those unexpected medical issues that happen to all of us sooner or later. So, a few days ago, I went to the appropriate website where I can find those general practitioners that my medical insurance considers to be “in network.” I plugged in the 48854 zip code, I selected a search radius, and *voila*, the names and phone numbers of seventeen doctors appeared in front of me.

It’s not that there’s any urgent need for me to go find a doctor. I just want to know who I will go see when I need to see somebody. There’s nothing pressing; no major medical conditions that I’m worried about. Lord knows, there are millions of people in this world of ours who are in need of a doctor far more than I am. So perhaps it’s not that I *need* a doctor; I just *want* one.

That woman who went trailing along after Jesus, on the other hand . . . she *needed* a doctor. The gospel writer describes her as “a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.” Twelve years! She didn’t just *want* a doctor. She *needed* one. Twelve years is a long time to go on suffering. For twelve years, she had been trying to find *someone* who could help her, to the extent that her financial resources would allow. And for twelve years she had been dealing with the social stigma that came with her condition; according to the old Jewish laws in the book of Leviticus, anyone with a condition like hers was considered “unclean,” ritually impure, for a whole week following, every single time that she had a problem. That prohibited her from touching anybody that whole week long. She

had been living with this condition, and with this stigma, for twelve whole years, and nothing that she had tried, and nobody that she had seen, had been able to solve her problem.

She needed a doctor. Or, perhaps, she needed *more* than a doctor. Maybe she needed . . . maybe she needed . . . well, maybe she needed somebody like Jesus.

That man whose daughter had died . . . he needed a doctor too. Here we have a man of some importance in the city; he was a leader at the local synagogue. Imagine if there was just one church in Mason, one church that everybody went to, and the key lay leader – the council president, or the vestry warden, or the clerk of session – whatever the appropriate title may have been – that key lay leader had a young daughter who had taken ill and died. The whole community descended upon his house to mourn and to pay their respects. But this father leaves the house, leaves the mourners, and goes in search of someone who might help his now-dead daughter.

He needed a doctor. Or, perhaps, he needed *more* than a doctor. Maybe he needed . . . maybe he needed . . . well, maybe he needed somebody like Jesus.

Some people know when they need to see a doctor. Some people know that they need help. The woman with the hemorrhage and the man with the dead daughter - they *know* that they need help. They get up, out of their chairs, out of their houses, and they head off of somebody who can help them. They *go looking* for a doctor. The woman with the hemorrhage . . . the man with the dead daughter . . . they knew they needed help. They went *looking* for a doctor. And they found . . . well, they found something – *Someone* – *more* than a doctor.

But not everyone goes looking for a doctor. Sometimes, people know that they really *should* go see a doctor, but are too afraid to pick up the phone and schedule an appointment. Sometimes, people think that they can go through life without worrying about their health, though sooner or later that attitude just might catch up to them. And sometimes . . . well, sometimes, people are just in denial. Sometimes, deep down inside, people may have some inkling that not everything is as it should be, but it never rises to the level of consciousness. It never surfaces from inside them enough to make them even stop to think that maybe all is not right with their body or their soul. Sometimes, it takes somebody who is willing to *challenge* them, to help them see the truth about themselves.

I'd be willing to bet that the new disciple named Matthew was kind of like that. Someone who was living in denial. Someone who had some inkling, deep down inside, that all was not right with his body or his soul. Someone who never allowed himself to stop to think about that. Someone who needed to be *challenged*, to help him see the truth about himself.

Thank goodness, the doctor makes house calls.

You see, Matthew was living a comfortable live as a tax collector. Comfortable, indeed. Remember – Palestine, two thousand years ago, was occupied territory. It was under the dominion of the Roman Empire, the great Roman Empire that, at that point in history, spread across the entire Mediterranean region. Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, all the little countries

in between, the entire northern coast of Africa, along with what is now called Israel – those areas all belonged, two thousand years ago, to the Roman Emperor and all of his legions. Now, running an empire costs money. Building roads and bridges and aqueducts costs money. Waging war costs money. Maintaining control of the masses – especially in the troubled areas like Palestine where the local people weren't at all sure they *wanted* to be ruled by Rome – well, that costs money. So, the government did what any government does to keep itself in business; it levied taxes. And, in the case of Palestine, the Roman officials contracted with certain Jews who wanted to turn a little profit. These people would pay tribute to Rome out of their *own* pockets, and then they would go around to all the people in the villages where they lived and ask for money from them. Well, that might not be quite correct; it wasn't exactly "asking." It wasn't like somebody walking from house to house, knocking on your front door, and saying, "Hey, I'd like to tell you about my favorite charity, and I'd love it if you could give this charity a little money." No, these people were legally *required* to pay their tribute to these tax collectors – these fellow Jews who were working for the Romans. And there was some coercion involved. So these tax collectors would collect money from the people in their village, to make up for the money that they had already paid to the Roman officials. And if they turned a little profit while engaging in this activity – or if they turned a *substantial* profit while engaging in this activity – well, that was what made being a tax collector a desirable profession for some people. Sometimes, people will do *anything* to make a little profit for themselves . . . or a *lot* of profit . . . no matter who they hurt in the process . . . no matter the cost to their own soul.

Thank goodness . . . the doctor makes house calls.

So one day, Jesus comes walking by Matthew's tax booth. The story of what happened next, as it is told in this gospel, is really quite short. Jesus says to Matthew the tax collector, "Follow me," and Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. There is no indication in the text of Jesus' motive for extending the invitation, and no indication in the text of Matthew's motive for following.

But I have a hunch . . . I have a hunch that Matthew was one of those people in denial. Deep down inside, I think he had some inkling that not everything was as it should be, but it had never risen to the level of consciousness. It never surfaced from inside him enough to make him even stop to think that maybe all was not right with his soul. But then, one day, Jesus comes walking along, and it's as if Jesus taps him on the shoulder, says to him, "Hey, Matthew, don't you think that God created you for something better than *this*," and a light bulb goes off in Matthew's head, and he realizes – he realizes, deep down inside his soul, that maybe he had been born to do something a little more wholesome. Jesus wakes Matthew up to the truth about himself that I think Matthew had been trying to suppress.

Thank goodness . . . the doctor makes house calls.

Jesus then heads off to a dinner party. A dinner party, at somebody's house. And there, on the guest list, are all the people you wouldn't want to be seen with. The gospel calls them "sinners and tax collectors." You know the type: those people who just aren't fit to be around. The kind of people your mother warned you about. All those people who live – you know, who live like *that*. Jesus is here, hanging out with all these misfits and outcasts, having dinner with people who were generally

considered to be impure and unclean. And it gets noticed. The Pharisees -- those good, honorable, respectable Jewish leaders -- or at least, that's how they saw themselves -- they notice who Jesus is hanging out with. They take note of who's at this dinner party. All those people that *they* would never invite to a dinner party at *their* houses. They ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does he do this? Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Thank goodness, this doctor makes house calls. And thank goodness, there's no limit to the houses *this* doctor will visit. There were hosts of people who were not deemed good enough to dine with, not deemed good enough to spend time with, not worthy enough to receive religious goods and services. But, thank goodness, *this* doctor makes house calls . . . even, or perhaps *especially*, to *those* people.

Sometimes, we know we need a doctor. Sometimes, like the woman with the hemorrhage, or the man with the daughter who died, we know we need somebody who can help us. We know what our problem is, and we know who to go see to get it fixed.

But sometimes, we don't. Sometimes, we don't know what we need. Sometimes, we don't know where to go. Sometimes, we don't know where to turn. Sometimes, we may not even realize that not everything about our lives is as it should be. Sometimes, we may be in denial about what's *really* going on deep down in our soul. Sometimes, we just might not want to face the awful, hard truth about ourselves. Sometimes, we don't want to face the fact that we've got a problem with drinking . . . or with gambling . . . or with compulsive spending . . . or with lying . . . or with hiding things that ought to be revealed . . . or with hurting people we care about . . . or with getting rich by exploiting others . . .

If we know what our problem is, there are people we can turn to. There are general practitioners, and there are social workers, and there are psychologists, and there are guidance counselors, and there are all sorts of other professionals who can help us out if we know what our problem is, and if we're willing to face it. Thank goodness, there are *doctors* who can help us when we need them . . . and thank goodness, there's also Someone who is *more* than a doctor.

If we *don't* know that we have a problem, but we really do; or if deep down inside there's this little voice that's trying to say to us that maybe God created us for something better, that maybe we had been born to do something a little more *wholesome* -- well, thank goodness, there's a doctor who makes house calls. There's a doctor, or Someone *more* than a doctor, who might just walk by us one day, tap us on the shoulder, and say, "Hey -- come on, leave that life behind, and follow me."

Whatever your need, may you find the doctor you are seeking. May you also know that, whatever your need, there is another doctor, or Someone *more* than a doctor, who is right there with you, right when you need him. And may you be aware that this Doctor might just show up in your life one day, right when you least expect it, and tap you on the shoulder to invite you to live a more wholesome life. Because this doctor . . . *this* doctor makes house calls.

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