

Seeing Past the Underminers

^{NRS} Mat 9:9 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."

^{NRS} Mat 9:18 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.

In the hills north of Cardiff in Wales lie the ruins of a great castle- the Castle Dryslwyn. It was built around 1220 by Welsh princes who were trying to hold on to their land and their ways from the spreading English threat. But even though they built the castle high upon a hill overlooking all the valley below, when the English besieged the castle, the Welsh were unable to hold their position.

For one thing the English had better technology. They brought with them a *trebuchet*, an enormous siege engine that's basically a souped up version of a catapult. They have the restored trebuchet on the grounds now as well as the enormous boulders the English hurled at the walls of the castle.

But even more than technology, what the English had was cunning. For Dryslwyn castle was not taken down by the boulders of the trebuchet. It was breached by

men called sappers, who dug a mine underneath the walls of the castle, and then allowed the tunnel to collapse, utterly destroying the massive walls of Dryslwyn. In the most literal and original sense of the word- the Welsh were undermined.

Undermining is what we do when we've tried going after somebody head on and the direct approach isn't working. Just like going on a bear hunt- when you can't go over it, and can't go around it, you gotta go through it- which in this case means under it. And it isn't just for castles either- it's for relationships, too. My personal favorite in this area is the undermining compliment, also known as the backhanded compliment. It's something that sounds nice on the surface...but then after a moment or so, you think, "Wait a minute!" The other week I was watching *So You Think You Can Dance*, and the producer of the show, Nigel tells this poor girl, and I quote: "You have managed to cover up your size since you began this entire competition. Because you're so brilliant, no one thinks about you being so big." And I think he actually meant this as a compliment. At the church I served in Austin our music director came up to me after I'd been gone on vacation. She said, "You filled out a little bit, haven't you?" I just stared at her. "But it looks good on you," she continued, "makes you look older, more like a pastor." I couldn't even think of how to respond. But in my head I'm thinking, "So...I'm fat *and* too young to be a pastor. Great."

But this isn't the only kind of undermining- another tactic, a darker tactic, is to pretend to care about a person, and under the pretense of caring for them, say all kinds of things that aren't really caring at all. And it's this kind of undermining that the Pharisees go for. The Pharisees had tried to get Jesus in so many ways. Up to this point in

Matthew they had tested him every chance they got, firing off direct questions trying to draw him out- with things like “Teacher, what’s the greatest commandment.” Or “Teacher, tell us is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” They weren’t afraid of this young punk who hadn’t even gone to seminary. They just got in his face. But every time they set their trebuchets up to crush his defenses, his walls always managed to stand. He saw those boulders coming and just smashed them out of the air.

So, you have to give the Pharisees credit here. Not only did they not give up- but they even figured out that what they were doing wasn’t working and came up with a different strategy. And what a strategy. It’s brilliant. Maybe we can’t find a weakness in the teacher, but maybe we can work on his friends. And so in a stroke of genius, the Pharisees go after the disciples.

Did you notice in the text this morning? Did you notice that when the Pharisees go after Jesus for calling Matthew, a tax collector, and partying down with all the riff raff, they didn’t actually go to *him*? No, they go to the disciples. They go to his friends, saying, “You know, we’ve had our differences in the past, but down deep we’re really all on the same side. We respect Torah. You respect Torah. We respect the prophets. You respect the prophets. And all of us are against Rome. So we’re just concerned about you. I mean do you know what your teacher is doing? Do you know he’s hanging out with people who are working with *Rome*? I mean what is he doing? You’ve given your lives to follow after him, and he welcomes in a *tax collector*? It’s just, I mean we wouldn’t say anything, it’s just that he’s making the whole movement look bad.”

It’s breathtakingly brilliant, this strategy is. And I think it was effective, too. I mean we know from Paul’s letters that Peter absolutely couldn’t stand Gentiles. He

wouldn't even break bread with Gentile Christians. He certainly couldn't have been happy about Jesus bringing in a tax collector- a guy who was basically an agent for Rome. Tax collectors basically went around with Roman soldiers extorting money from Jews, and they were famous for skimming some off the top. Why not- who was there to stop them. So Peter couldn't have been happy.

And then I think about ol' Judas. Judas with his money bag- he was the treasurer of the outfit. He was the one with his eye on the money. And now Jesus brings in another money man? And a tax collector no less. Judas couldn't have been happy. John tells us Judas is a thief who regularly had his hand in the cookie jar. It was going to be a lot harder to steal now that Jesus was letting in a professional like Matthew. Would he be able to pull the wool over Matthew's eyes- or would he have to cut him in on the take? No, I'm sure Judas wasn't thrilled about the new guy, either.

And so the group begins to wonder about all this- the ground of trust between them and Jesus begins to crumble beneath the tunnel under their feet. They grumble so much that Jesus has to step in. Now, one way to read this text is to imagine that the Pharisees have slipped into wherever Jesus and the disciples are hanging out, and the Pharisees are talking to the disciples and Jesus overhears them and responds to the Pharisees. But the text doesn't actually say who Jesus is speaking to. It's ambiguous. Jesus could be talking to the Pharisees or he could be addressing the disciples, or both. And it makes much more sense to me that the Pharisees had planted their dark seeds inside the hearts of the disciples and with their work done- they got out of dodge. And it's really the disciples who raise their questions to Jesus, leading him to snap at them

saying: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Now, nobody really knows, but it makes so much sense that he's talking to the disciples, the church, because we have such a hard time allowing new people in, don't we? The church has all these ideas about who belongs and who doesn't. And we set up these written and unwritten rules about what you're supposed to wear, and when you're supposed to stand up and sit down, and when you're supposed to talk, and how you're supposed to talk, and what prayers you're supposed to know. One of the interesting points that came out in the mission study from last Saturday is how we have weird insider language. Like we don't have a hallway or a lobby in front of the sanctuary- nooooo, we have to have a Narthex. Well what the heck is a Narthex?

And don't get me wrong. It's not that I think we should get rid of what makes us distinct- but I think we can do a much better job of letting folks know the meaning of all this. If *we* even know what it is. Anyone know what the history of the Narthex actually is? First off, a narthex is generally any area or room right before you enter a sanctuary. But the word narthex is a Greek word for the giant fennel. The giant fennel stalk was used as a kind of container- like when Prometheus came down from heaven with fire, he carried it in a fennel stalk, a narthex. So, the meaning of the term Narthex is that it's a kind of holding space, in which we prepare ourselves for worship. Now before this week I sure didn't know that- it's a pretty good guess is anyone coming here for the first, oh, thousand times probably doesn't either. So, we're going to be working on ways to figure out how to make it easier to understand what it is we're doing around here.

Although with the disciples and Jesus, the problem here isn't unusual language or a strange custom- it's whether everyone is really welcome in the church or not. Is church just for folks who look the same, talk the same, and act the same? Or is what binds us together something different? And so Jesus sits the disciples down and gives them a lesson in church 101. He tells them he has come for people like them AND for people like Matthew. He tells them he has come for people who know are doing OK on their own but are looking for something more in their life like they were in their fishing boats, AND he's come for folks who not doing so hot, but are willing to walk with him. See, what binds the church together is not our sociology, it's not whether we get along, it's not even what we believe- what binds us together at the deepest level is that we want to walk in the way of Jesus. And he tells them yes, from time to time he will invite someone into the fellowship not because he thinks they will be like-minded and fit in and be an asset to the church- but because they are hungry to follow after him and need the church to be an asset for *them*.

Now the sermon must have worked, because we don't hear anything else from the disciples about the tax collector in their midst. So yet again, the Pharisees give it their best shot, but even when they went after the disciples, their plan didn't work. But you know what I'm left wondering about? I'm left wondering how Jesus copes with all this without letting it get to him? I mean it's one thing when you're enemies attack you, right? I mean you're prepared for this- you can deal with this. But when your friends undermine you. When your family nips at you- that hurts. And yet throughout the whole text he stays focused.

And, at least according to the text, the way he kept perspective was by seeing. It was by seeing. The word *idon*, seeing, it shows up three times here. Repetition is one of the ways Gospels writers say, “Hey, pay attention!” First Jesus sees Matthew, the tax collector. Then, he looks into the face of that woman with a hemorrhage. And then he sees the mourners outside the house of the little girl. What I think is happening is that he’s literally looking past the underminers to the world around him, to what’s really important- and not getting caught up in the games the underminers are playing. One pastor writes that the power of undermining is that, “A casual observer joins forces with our internal critic.” In other words undermining works because our eyes are taken off what’s important, namely the world around us, and all of a sudden we become obsessed with ourselves and with thinking about what we’re doing.

Matthew the tax collector was sitting there ready to leave everything behind and follow. The Pharisees want to make the disciples and Jesus worry about looking respectable- Jesus says this isn’t important- what’s important are people who want to change and making them feel welcome. Then, there was the woman with the hemorrhage. In spite of hurrying after that important synagogue leader, Jesus stopped and took time to care for this woman. He even looked at her- gazing right into her face. I wonder how long it had been since anyone had done that- since anyone had looked at her, really looked at her. Again, he didn’t worry about what anybody else thought, about whether they approved or not- he kept his eyes on what was important. The third time he looks- he looks at the mourners. I think this is why when they laugh at him later he doesn’t get mad. He doesn’t call them faithless and leave. He doesn’t even respond.

He's seen them, seen inside them- he knows that they are grieving. And so he stays focused on what was important- namely that little girl.

Keeping our eyes open and focused on what's really important- this is the only way to keep from getting sidetracked and undermined. Or after we've been undermined and knocked down- I think it's the only way to get up again.

A while back I heard a well known preacher talking about a time he was in Lubbock, Texas. He was speaking at this big church conference there, and it hadn't been going well. He was just kind of off, and folks were being kind, but he knew it just wasn't at his best- and it was gnawing at him. After two of his talks fizzled, he found himself going over and over everything in his mind- was it him, was it the audience? And one afternoon, just trying to clear his mind, he decided to take a walk. Now, let me tell you- I've spent time in Lubbock. It's not the kind of place where you go to take a walk to clear your mind. It's a dusty town in the Texas panhandle. When the wind blows from the East you get the smell of cattle. When it blows from the West you get the oil field. And then, if you're very lucky, you're there when it all kind of swirls together.

But there he was, walking around, just trying to why it was he even became a pastor in the first place when he saw the strangest thing. He was on a street with modest houses on it. And he saw a man and a woman in a car pull in their drive way. And the man got out of the driver's side and he walked over to the woman in the passenger's seat. And he opened the door, and he just threw his arms around her. The man said he almost had to avert his gaze it was so passionate. He said with all the stories of desperate housewives and all- here was one marriage that obviously hadn't lost it's zip.

But then he realized while he was right about it being a love story- he didn't see at first how deep of a story it really was. As he continued to walk slowly down the lane, saw this man slide his arms down to his wife's legs. And he saw him turn her in the car- turn her towards the door of the car. And then he stood up and went to the back of the car and took out a wheel chair. And he unfolded it, and he rolled it to her. And then, with an ease, a grace of motion that only comes through sheer repetition, the man maneuvered his wife out of the car and into the chair like a boy unloading the groceries. And then he slowly, lovingly positioned her in until she was comfortable and wheeled her in- out of the hot sun.

And this pastor who had been so confused, who had been so focused on all the critics in his head, suddenly thought about and saw in his head all of the people in the world he knew who cared for another like this- adult children now taking care of their parents. Parents caring for children with disabilities. Or just spouses or partners hanging in there when the love didn't come easy any longer.

And just like that he remembered he did know about good news- but not because he had heard about it, but because he'd seen it. **Amen.**