

Who are the people that Jesus reached out to? Who are the people that the message of Jesus is intended for? Jesus and the Multitudes—**that's today's** topic. Let us pray:

What is your favorite story of Jesus reaching out to someone? (solicit answers from the congregation)

There is a pattern to whom Jesus reached out.

Throughout history, and in many different cultures, society has been made up of different classes of people. There are the elite at the top, 1 or 3 or 5 % of the people. They have the most money and the most power. They have influence and opportunities. They hoard weapons and wealth. Their influence is of critical importance in government, business, religion, media, art, science, and the military. They have many allies, allies who support them and are loyal to them, allies who keep the systems running and the structures in place and who are rewarded for their loyalty.

The bulk of most societies, though, are made up of people on the bottom, who do not have very much, the worker bees. They are the cheap labor that support the elite. In contrast to the elite, they receive very little pay, have very little influence or prestige or, for that matter, very little notice, especially from those who do have influence and prestige and wealth. This is particularly true because they, the multitudes, live apart from the Elites—often in slums or in the distant country. They are surprisingly invisible and insignificant to those at the top.

**And in between are the elites' allies, the tax collectors** and managers and others who are the go-betweens, the ones who bridge the gap between the elites and the multitudes at the bottom. They make more money than the multitudes, and they live on the hope that they, or at least their children, will climb up the social structure and get closer to the elites. But those with the influence and the power do not make it easy to move up into their ranks.

**These dynamics were very much part of Jesus' world.** But his parables **don't** reflect it—rather they are in response to it. His parables make heroes of farmers, shepherds, slaves, widows and even Samaritans. As for the folks in the middle, **as Brian McLaren describes it, "he captured the dilemma of what we call middle management—the stewards, tax collectors, and their associates who extracted income from the poor and powerless below them for the sake of the rich and powerful above them."** But the elites, they did not fair so well. Jesus often singled them out, spoke of their greed and their hypocrisy, especially if the religious leaders who sided with the elites.

Jesus turned the social pyramid on its head. Our scriptures today show that.

Little children. Parents wanted to bring them to Jesus and the disciples, **coming from the world, didn't think they were important enough to take up Jesus' time.** So the disciples shooed them away—protecting Jesus from the unimportant who might distract them.

But Jesus stopped the disciples, rebuked them. He had the children brought to him and said, **“let the children come to me, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”**

Or there was the time when Jesus and his disciples were approaching Jericho and a whole crowd had come out to see Jesus. **“Hey Jesus! Over here! Jesus!”** a voice calls over the noise of the crowd. There was a blind man and who heard that Jesus, the great rabbi, the great healer, was passing by and so, in his desperation, in his need, in his poverty, he calls out. This time it is the crowd that tries to shush him. But Jesus notices the ones that society does not, the ones that society shushes. And hearing his cries, Jesus stops and asks that the man be brought forth. **“What can I do for you?”** Jesus asks.

Jesus the great rabbi, the great healer, takes time to see a man of no account—literally, a man with no wealth, no business, no status, a beggar and yet **Jesus asks, “what can I do for you?”**

These stories are from our scriptures today, but they aren't the only ones. There was the Samaritan woman. **Unworthy of Jesus' attention for so many reasons—a Samaritan—no good Jew would speak to a Samaritan, and even worse a woman, married multiple times and not even married at the point when they met.** And yet, Jesus talked to her, offered her living water, good news.

People who were unimportant to society, but who Jesus went out of his way to speak with, to heal, and even to single out for attention, the poor and unimportant, the disabled, women, and children who were all critically important to Jesus. These are people at the bottom of the social pyramid but they are important to Jesus. They are important to God.

But these were not the only ones important. Jesus also had a special place in his heart and his ministry for those in the middle. Our stories today include two stories of tax collectors.

One a favorite of many of us, if only from Sunday School—the story of Zacchaeus. A tax collector who, according to the story, wanted to see Jesus. **He couldn't see over the crowd and so he climbed a tree in hopes of getting a glimpse of the man about whom he had heard so much.**

Something about tax collectors—in Roman times, tax collectors were charged with collecting the taxes as **levied by the government.** But that wasn't all they collected, because tax collectors earned their money by keeping anything they could collect above and beyond the taxes due. As a result, tax collectors were hated. They sided with the invaders, the Romans, who were occupying Israel. And they were crooked—indeed their income went up the more crooked they were.

And Jesus accepted them, sat down to share a table and a meal, even sought them out, calling a tax collector as a disciple, inviting himself to **Zacchaeus's house.**

And he often ate with tax collectors and sinners. **And the Pharisees didn't like it.**

“Why would you eat with sinners?” ask the Pharisees. “Why would a good person, a religious leader, a person of knowledge and wisdom even, meet with such people?” they ask.

**You see, they can’t understand.** Jesus has the chance, the chance to be more, to be above the masses, to get out of the bottom of the social pyramid. His wisdom, his ability to teach, the way he attracts people, he has the ability to move up the pyramid. And yet, he spends his time and attention on these who are unworthy. Even more than that, he seemed to enjoy their company.

And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, those who were elite, could not understand. Jesus tried explaining to them, with simple, relatable explanation. Why did Jesus spend so much time with sinners, with the imperfect and the downtrodden? Those who are well, have no need of a doctor. A doctor treats the sick, he said. He did not come for the righteous, for those who have everything. Jesus came for those who needed him, for those who are marginalized, shunned, scapegoated, ignored, oppressed.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, have everything. Prestige, power, education, and yet **they more often than not come off badly in Jesus’ stories.** They are often vilified, accused of being a pit of vipers and hypocrites.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, these descriptions of the Jewish leaders led to antisemitism and stereotyping and judgment of all Jews, leading to Jews being oppressed, shunned, and ultimately, to the holocaust.

But **Jesus wasn’t critical of the elites of his time because they were Jewish**—he was critical because their privilege was more important to them than other people, more important than caring for other people.

And this was not new—it’s the same message in Ezekiel 34. God, through the prophet Ezekiel: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup>So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.”

The problem of elites who look out for themselves, rather than caring for those they could help—that was not a problem that was new in Jesus’ time. Ezekiel spoke to God’s desire that the elites should be shepherds, caring for and leading the people, and God’s judgment when they didn’t.

I will tell you that I had a hard time writing this sermon, and maybe even shied away from some of what I think God would have me say because I’ve been criticized for being too political, too one-sided. And I can understand why someone might feel that way. But the truth is, These are the teachings of Jesus—we are supposed to help the down and out. We are to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, care for the outsider, the outcast, the refugee. Jesus stands with them. They are the least of these.

The Pope recently said this: **"It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help,"** he said. **"If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I'm a hypocrite."**

Brian McLaren concludes his chapter on Jesus and the Multitudes this way: "There are always multitudes at the bottom being marginalized, scapegoated, shunned, ignored, and forgotten by elites at the top. And there are always those in the middle torn between the two. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to stand with the multitudes, even if doing so means being marginalized, criticized, and misunderstood right along with them." We are called to stand with and for anyone who cannot speak for themselves, anyone that the powerful look down on or take advantage of. We are called as followers of Christ to offer his love to those who need it, even if it means eating with sinners and tax collectors or welcoming children and their many questions, rather than people of importance. Amen.