

This scripture reading has one of the most profound miracles that Jesus ever performed. Did you hear it? Maybe not because it's not an obvious miracle. No one is healed. No one is brought back from the dead. Nothing supernatural happens.

But it's a miracle nonetheless.

Hold that thought for a minute and we'll come back to it.

We humans make all sorts of assumptions about other humans based on what we perceive them to be, even with very little actual information. For example, what comes to your mind when I briefly describe just some hypothetical person's appearance:

A man asking for money at a busy intersection.

A pregnant teenager.

A person sitting in a big truck with a "Don't Tread on Me" bumper sticker.

A drag queen.

If we're honest, my guess is that just hearing those words I used made you think and feel certain things about that hypothetical person. Maybe positive. Maybe negative. But my guess is that you have some pretty strong assumptions about these hypothetical people even though you know next to nothing about them.

I don't mean that as a criticism of you but rather I think that's just what we humans do. We make all sorts of assumptions about people based on what we think we know about them even if we have very little information. At its worst, this mentality when it's not checked is how entire groups of people can be demonized. It's the mentality that justifies laws that target specific groups of people. At its worst, this way of assuming has pretty awful consequences.

And that's always been true.

In our Scripture today, we meet Matthew, the tax collector. And people had all sorts of assumptions about who tax collectors were – none of them good.

First, a little context.

Tax collectors were responsible for collecting the taxes owed to the Roman government, but the way they made a living for themselves was by charging extra taxes and keeping the left overs for themselves.

So let's say so and so owes the Roman government \$10 in taxes. As the tax collector, I might charge them \$12 dollars and send the 10 off to Rome and keep the other 2 for myself. But

maybe I decided I could really take advantage of this power I have as a tax collector and so instead of charging \$12, I charge \$18 almost doubling his tax bill and keep \$8 for myself.

You can see why tax collectors had a bad reputation. Now we don't know what kind of tax collector Matthew was. We don't know if he was just doing his job and trying to make a living or if he was extorting people. But we certainly know what people would have thought about him.

If I had done the same exercise with people of Jesus' day that I did with you at the beginning of this sermon and asked them to imagine what they thought about when they heard the word tax collector, I imagine they would have said things like:

A cheat

A traitor

Or words not appropriate for me to say in church.

But here comes Jesus and the Scripture says he saw Matthew. And that right there is what I think is the miracle of the story. He saw Matthew. He didn't see what people were saying about him, he didn't see him based on all the ways Matthew had been labelled. He didn't assume the worst. Rather, just the opposite. He saw Matthew as a human, as a child of God, as a potential disciple. He saw the very best in him.

Jesus saw Matthew not based on his reputation or on all the ways he had been labelled but he saw him in his full humanity. He saw him as someone worthy of being loved and accepted and included.

Jesus saw Matthew.

My favorite TV show of the last several years has been Ted Lasso. Any other fans here?

If you haven't seen it, I'll give you a quick overview. Rebecca Welton became the owner of a British soccer club that she won in a divorce settlement because her ex husband Rupert had an affair. She only wants to make Rupert suffer and the best way she knows to do that is to try to sabotage the one thing that Rupert cares about – the soccer club. So she hires Ted, a goofy American football coach who knows nothing about soccer – to be the club's manager thinking that he will run the team into the ground and make them a laughingstock.

But it turns out there's way more to Ted than what you see on the surface. No, he doesn't know anything about soccer, but he understands people and he understands how to make people feel like a part of a team. And slowly, he wins everybody over, including Rebecca.

Well, everybody except Rupert who likes to constantly show up around Rebecca with a younger woman and make sure everybody knows how awful he thinks Rebecca is doing as a soccer club owner.

In one scene, Rupert walks into a pub where Rebecca and Ted are having a beer together and begins to make his verbal barbs at Rebecca. While he was not allowed to own any part of the soccer club by the arrangement of the divorce settlement, he told them that he had given his new wife the money to buy part of the club and that the two of them were planning to sit every week in the owner's box behind Rebecca and tell the press how awful she was as an owner.

And that's when Ted, goofy, unassuming Ted, tricks Rupert into making a wager against him over a game of darts. If Rupert wins, Ted will let Rupert pick the starting lineup for the rest of the season. But if Ted wins, Rupert can never sit in the owner's box.

Rupert brings out his own personal set of darts and, of course, everyone in the pub thinks Ted is toast.

But Ted knew something that Rupert didn't. And that is that Ted was a master dart player. And Ted also knew that Rupert would never even consider the possibility that Ted might be his equal or even better at darts or, really, anything at all.

So toward the end of the dart match, Ted tells Rupert that he once saw a sign outside his son's school with a Walt Whitman quote:

"Be curious. Not judgmental."

And then Ted told Rupert that his entire life people underestimated him. He talked about all the way back to high school people made fun of and belittled him. And then he says this:

"All them fellows who used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. They thought they had everything all figured out so they judged everything and they judged everyone. And I realized that their underestimating me, who I was had nothing to do with it. If they were curious they would have asked questions. Questions like, 'have you played a lot of darts Ted?' To which I would have answered, 'Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father.'"

Ted throws the last dart. Bull's Eye. He won and Rupert lost.

This is my favorite scene from the entire series and in its own comedic way, Ted Lasso teaches us profound lessons about life. In this case, I think it's the exact same lesson that Jesus taught the crowds when he saw Matthew.

"Be curious. Not judgmental."

I want to end this sermon with where I began. I'm going to once again say a tiny description about our hypothetical list of people, but this time when you hear the words, I want to invite you to hear them without curiosity. Instead of making assumptions about what you think you know about each person, imagine what question you might like to ask them.

A man asking for money at a busy intersection.

A pregnant teenager.

A person sitting in a big truck with a "Don't Tread on Me" bumper sticker.

A drag queen.

Jesus saw Matthew – not based on what everyone assumed about a tax collector. But he saw Matthew as Matthew. He had dinner with him and all his tax collector buddies. He got to know them. And more than anything, he believed there was way more to Matthew than what everyone assumed about him.

As I said, it's a profound miracle.

But unlike some of Jesus' other miracles, this is one that we have the capacity to perform also.

We're never going to make a blind person see or a dead person come back to life. But if we try really hard, we might be able to see the best in people, just like Jesus sees the best in each and every one of us.

Amen.