

June 7, 2026  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Pentecost 2  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Wideness of God’s Mercy”

“For I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.”

Most fine-dining restaurants are known for their exclusivity, restricting who can get a reservation and who can afford their high prices. But JBJ Soul Kitchen is different; it is a fine-dining establishment known for its inclusivity and accessibility. Established fifteen years ago in Red Bank, New Jersey by Jon Bon Jovi, the restaurant opens its doors and tables to all, whether or not they can afford a meal. JBJ Soul Kitchen defines itself as a “community restaurant, a place where *“both individuals and families can come to enjoy a delicious, locally sourced meal in a warm and welcoming setting while meeting our neighbors. As a community restaurant, our mission is not only to serve healthy meals but also to partner with local organizations to provide additional resources, addressing needs beyond food security”* The menu does not list prices but suggested donations for those who are able to pay; for those unable to pay, they are invited to enjoy a delicious meal and join the JBJ community by volunteering. In its fifteen years of existence, the restaurant has served almost 250,000, some of them served by Bon Jovi himself. The wideness of this restaurant’s welcome means that all people – rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown – are welcome to enjoy a fine meal and warm fellowship in a place where *“all are welcome at our table.”*

JBJ Soul Kitchen did not exist when I was still living in New Jersey, but I had visited Red Bank on numerous occasions and found that other restaurants were not as welcoming to all. Many were very expensive, restricting their clientele to only those who could afford the cost. Others were known for their exclusivity and difficulty in getting a reservation; it was seen as a status symbol if you were one of the privileged few who could secure a table for dinner. Other restaurants were private, restricted to members only. Before the arrival of Bon Jovi’s community restaurant, many who sought a place to eat found that most tables in town were not open and welcoming to them.

Such exclusivity at dinner tables was a reality that many people faced in first-century Galilee where only persons who were deemed acceptable according to contemporary standards were welcome. All others – especially those who were considered “unclean” or “sinners” – found themselves on the outside looking in. This is the

context in which today's Gospel lesson is set, where Jesus and his disciples are at a dinner table with "*many tax collectors and sinners*" (Matthew 9:10). Tax collectors in the New Testament were typically associated with those labeled "sinners." Working for Herod Antipas, tax collectors in Galilee were viewed as traitors to God's people because they collected taxes for the illegitimate king who was associated with the occupying Roman Empire. Tax collectors were also known for collecting more money than they were supposed to collect, stealing from their own people to line their own pockets. But Jesus views such a person differently: not by their occupation or in the way others viewed them, but as persons worthy of God's grace and even worthy to be called as disciples; so "*as Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'follow me.'*" (9:9). As in Matthew's account of Jesus' calling his first disciples as he walks along the shores of the Sea of Galilee ("*And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'*" 4:19), it is Jesus' powerful word that creates discipleship; in both accounts, those he called immediately leave everything behind to answer his call:

- "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." – 4:20.
- "And [Matthew] got up and followed him." – 9:9.

The point is that Jesus' call is effective; people do not volunteer to become disciples but do so in answer to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. Jesus rejects persons who suppose they can become disciples by their own initiative; when a young man seeks to become his follower, Jesus instructs him to "*sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*" (19:21). Discipleship is always on Jesus' terms and is not subject to negotiation. On the other hand, Jesus welcomes those who had previously been excluded or seen as outcasts. Jesus' calling a tax collector to become a disciple would have been seen as surprising, but it signals that Christ has come to be light to all the world, not only for those seen as "upright" or "acceptable." While Matthew's presence at a tax booth signals his active role in Rome's economic oppression of the people of Israel, "*Jesus sees him, calls him, and invites him into his circle. The response is immediate: Matthew leaves everything and follows.*" (Danny Zacharias).

The scene shifts to a dinner table, presumably in Matthew's house. In ancient Judaism, table fellowship expressed covenant solidarity; shared food and drink symbolized a shared life. This dinner party in which Jesus presides suggests the biblical teaching of the coming of the Kingdom of God as a great feast, the eschatological fellowship of the messianic banquet ("*I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*" – 8:11). The matter of those with whom one chooses to eat was a matter

taken seriously in first-century Judaism; by sharing a meal with people identified as “*many tax collectors and sinners,*” Jesus identifies himself with these covenant outcasts and welcomes them into his kingdom. The table where Jesus is host is one in which all are welcome, even those reviled by others as outcasts and sinners.

Jesus’ inclusivity at his table does not go unnoticed by the Pharisees, who see Jesus has invited all the wrong people into his movement. Not only is he dining with traitorous tax collectors; he is also breaking bread with “sinners,” those who do not obey the Torah according to the Pharisees’ standards. Scandalized, the Pharisees approach Jesus’ disciples and demand to know “*why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” (9:11). Jesus was probably prepared for such a response from the religious authorities of his time, because he immediately provides an answer to their objections over the company he keeps. He combines a well-known proverb from Hellenistic literature with a quotation from Hosea: “*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.’ [Hosea 6:6].*” – 9:12-13a). Jesus’ mission is to forgive sins (“*She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” 1:21) involves going to sinners, as a physician must go to the sick. He quotes from Hosea to challenge the Pharisees not to allow external practices such as table fellowship regulations to replace the steadfast love that must be shown to God and to all people, including sinners and tax collectors who have fallen away:

- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” – 23:23-24.

Embodying Israel’s mission to be “*the light of the world*” (5:14) means that the mercy of God extended to all humanity must be understood in this manner as Jesus declares that “*I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*” (9:13b). While “*the Pharisees emphasize purity and sacrifice, Jesus reorients the discussion toward mercy, toward healing, and toward relationship*” (Zacharias).

- “Mercy is the divine attitude which embraces, it is God’s giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive. Jesus said he came not for those who were good but for the sinners. He did not come for the healthy, who do not need the doctor, but for the sick. For this reason, we can say that mercy is

God's identity card. God of Mercy, merciful God. For me, this really is the Lord's identity." – Pope Francis.

Gods' mercy is shown in the second part of today's Gospel lesson to two persons in need: a young girl who has died and a woman with a hemorrhage. Jesus again ranks mercy over sacrifice, in this case the ritual purity laws about avoiding contact with a corpse or a woman who is bleeding. As Jesus was responding to the objections of the Pharisees over his dinner companions, "*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.'*" (9:18). As the Magi knelt before the child in Bethlehem (2:11), now the synagogue leader kneels before Jesus, modeling great faith in his confidence that if Jesus comes to his home and lays his hands on his daughter, she will live. As Jesus and his disciples follow the man to his home, they are met by a woman who "*had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years*" (9:20, and affliction that was not only physical but also social, since according to the Torah everything she touches is ritually unclean ("*When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from the body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening.*" – Leviticus 15:16). The woman has already made the decision to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak, believing that "*if I only touch his cloak, I will be made well*" (9:21), even though such an act would have rendered Jesus ritually unclean. But from Jesus' perspective, this woman has exhibited great faith; when she touches his garment, Jesus turns and tells her to "*take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well*" (9:22). Instead of being defiled by this woman's uncleanness, Jesus' divine power transforms her condition; "*she is healed physically of her ailment, which in turn restores her socially as she is made ritually clean.*" (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

When Jesus arrives at the home of the synagogue ruler, the funeral is already in progress, with the customary hired flute players and wailers ("*the crowd making a commotion*" – 9:23). But from Jesus' perspective, death is not the last word and therefore a funeral is not appropriate, so he sends the paid mourners away, instructing them to "*go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping*" (9:24), to which they respond with derisive laughter. But Jesus demonstrates his authority even over death when "*he went in and took the girl by the hand, and the girl got up*" (9:25). Instead of becoming ritually unclean through his contact with a dead body, Christ's divine power goes out from him to raise a child from the dead, the result being that "*the report of this spread throughout the district*" (9:26). Jesus heals the woman and brings the young girl back to life so that they might join the tax collectors and sinners at the messianic banquet where all will be welcome and where all are seen not by the circumstances that caused them to be excluded but by their new identity through

which they are included and welcomed: as children beloved by God, the ones for whom God's mercy has made them worthy to sit at table with all God's people who have a place as children of the heavenly Father.

- “Community is the place of joy and celebration where we can say to one another, ‘Be of good cheer: the Lord has overcome the world, the Lord has overcome the evil one. Do not be afraid.’ Community is the place from which we speak the good news to the world: ‘Don’t be afraid. Look, it has already happened. Christ is risen.’” – Henri Nouwen.

This Sunday marks the beginning of what some Christians call “Ordinary Time,” the second part of the church year in which we consider what it means to live as God's people who through the first part of the year walked with our Lord from his birth to his baptism, from his ministry among his people to his entry in Jerusalem, from his death on the cross to his resurrection on Easter Sunday, from his ascension into heaven to the empowerment of the apostles by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. While there are no special commemorations reminding us of aspects of Jesus' life in this season, this “ordinary time” can also be seen as extraordinary because of what it means for us to live as God's holy people, those who have been born anew to a living hope through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. It means that we who once may have been excluded from being in God's presence as were all who were blessed by Christ and welcomed to his table have now also been welcomed and included because we are now God's people. It means that as our Lord does not look upon us from a human point of view but through the eyes of divine grace and mercy that we also no longer look upon each other from such a viewpoint, because *“if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). It means that because all of us have been reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ that *“there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28).

- “We ourselves can be agents of God's holiness, for God now dwells within us. In the midst of an unclean world, we can stride, as Jesus did, seeking ways to be a source of holiness. The sick and the maimed are for us not hot spots of contamination but potential reservoirs of God's mercy. We are called upon to extend that mercy, to be conveyers of grace, not avoiders of contagion. Like Jesus, we can help make the ‘unclean’ clean.” – Philip Yancey.

We still live in a world that is defined by exclusivity, by who we keep out and how we make certain that only those we deem “acceptable” are welcomed. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of *inclusivity*, a Gospel that proclaims “*there’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea ... there is welcome for the sinner, and a promised grace made good; there is mercy with the Saviour; there is healing in his blood.*” (ELW Hymn 588). The good news of the Word of God is that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” (John 3:16). The message of grace and mercy is that “*while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:6-8). The promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation is not merely for some people but for all people, for we are called to realize that “*God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*” (Acts 10:34-35).

- “It is the will of this saviour, not only that we should personally experience hope, forgiveness, life, and all such positive things in a truly genuine way, but that in the process of this discovery we should come to know others who need this abundance – and especially those who need it greater than our own. The God of the Bible is not interested in saving individual souls alone! It is the whole that this God wants to make whole; the entire creation, disintegrating under the impact of human anxiety and grasping, must be reintegrated.” – Douglas John Hall.

When he was asked about his inspiration for establishing his Soul Kitchen restaurant (which now has a second location in Toms River, New Jersey), Jon Bon Jovi responded that “*you don’t need a wallet to dine at Soul Kitchen – you just need a heart!*” It is not a person’s wealth or status that makes them worthy to be included at the table in these community restaurants; the mere face of one’s humanity is all it takes to be welcomed at these tables. As God’s people, we are welcomed in the fellowship of God’s people and the table of the Lord not because of who we are or what we may possess but because of *whose children* we are: children of the Heavenly Father, those who are beloved in the eyes of our Lord, people who have experienced the wideness of God’s mercy and in turn extend that wideness to others so every person may know that “*all are welcome in this place.*”

Amen.