

Pentecost 2-June 11, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 9:9-13

"Mercy for Sinners" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

If you were given the chance to tell your story of how Jesus came into your life, what would you say? Is your story one that would cover many pages or are you still trying to figure out what happened and might not have the words to describe the event. The gospel reading that you just heard is the story of how Jesus came into the life of Matthew the tax collector. Matthew is also the author of this account and the longest of the gospels in the bible. Since the story is about Matthew and he wrote the words, you might think Matthew would have spent a little more time telling us his story. Matthew goes into more detail when he describes the calling of Peter and his brother Andrew and James his brother John who were fishermen, than when he describes his own calling. Matthew could have started each sentence with the personal pronoun "I". Matthew could have told his story like this. **I remember when I was sitting by my tax booth, and I looked up and noticed Jesus was looking at me. I recall the very moment when I decided to follow Jesus and leave the life, I had been living by extorting money from the poor and from the government. My life is so much better now that I have left my life of sin and have become a follower and believer of Jesus Christ. I am thankful for my decision to follow Jesus.**

This is most often how we hear stories of people who have encountered Jesus for the first time or have stories like the prodigal son who was with his father for a period and then wandered off, but then realized he was living in sin and returned to his savior who was patiently waiting on the sidelines. We just drove back from Sheldon, Iowa and arrived back home at 2:00 AM after waiting for the final concert to begin after a delay because of a storm threat. Once again at this year's outdoor Christian music festival we heard several stories from featured singing groups and speakers of their encounters with Jesus. Thousands of people cheered on the successes of these performers who had achieved several years of sobriety or being drug free or saving their marriage that had nearly failed while they were wandering in sin. There is no question that many of these people give some credit to Jesus for putting them on the straight and narrow, but not one of their stories was told the way Matthew described the day that Jesus called him.

Matthew doesn't record any dialogue between Jesus and himself. In fact, Matthew never says a word. Even Jesus only says two words to call Matthew when he sees him at his tax booth and says, "Follow me." Matthew records what happened next, but again, there is no conversation exchanged between Jesus and Matthew. Matthew records, "And he got up and followed him." Matthew doesn't even say, and "I" got up and followed him. Nowhere in the story of Matthew's call, does Matthew claim to have any active role in becoming a follower of Jesus. The only additional words from Jesus that day were to the people who asked Matthew, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

The image on the cover of your bulletin today pretty well sums up the call of Matthew without using any words at all. This picture is an image of an actual painting that can be seen in a chapel in Rome which has been there since the year 1600. Caravaggio was the artist who was commissioned to create this painting which Caravaggio claimed to represent a nearly silent, dramatic narrative. In this portrayal of the call of Matthew, Jesus is pointing at Matthew as if to say, "Follow me" and Matthew is pointing at himself as if to say,

“Who me?” and you can see in the expressions on the faces of the bystanders who are wondering, “Jesus why are you hanging out with this group of people?”

Matthew records that after hearing Jesus say, “Follow me”, he got up and followed him. Matthew’s quick response is often interpreted as his act of obedience after being called by Jesus. However, it is not our obedience that is our motivation to follow Jesus. It is faith. The second reading for today recalls the calling of another main character in the bible, Abraham. Abraham’s story is recorded in Genesis when the Lord looks at him and gives him the promise that he would be the father of many nations. Like when Jesus told Matthew to “follow me”, the Lord told Abraham to get out of your country to a land that I will show you. Like Matthew, Abraham got up and went. The most logical next question from someone who has been told “follow me” or that was told to get up and go to a land that I will show you, is “Where are we going”? Neither Abraham nor Matthew asks this clarifying question. They simply get up and go. Followers of Jesus do what they do by faith, not by works of the law or obedience.

This did not make sense to the bystanders who watched where Jesus led Matthew after he was called. The bystanders knew that Jesus was a teacher in the temple and was sent by God. But where God sent Jesus troubled these bystanders and it troubled them where Jesus led Matthew that day. Obedience to the law would make sense to stay away from evil. But Jesus did not come into the world to make sense. Jesus came to make disciples. Jesus led Matthew, the tax collector, to dine with more tax collectors and sinners of other kinds as well. This would make as much sense as inviting a recovering smoking, drinking, and gambling addict to have a meal at a casino.

This is when Jesus gives the Pharisees a lesson to go home and study. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Jesus quoted words from the book of Hosea, which was our first reading for today, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.”

When Jesus sees a sinner, he draws close and delivers mercy. When the Pharisees saw Jesus showing mercy to sinners, they separated themselves just far enough from Jesus to still see what he was up to, but close enough to hear the words of mercy that he was speaking. These Pharisees were living up to the meaning of their name which literally means, “one who is separated.”

Once again, Jesus upsets the apple cart of salvation by giving mercy to undeserving sinners. Jesus came to Matthew and made him his disciple before hearing a word of remorse from Matthew about all his shading dealings of his past. Jesus came to Matthew while he was yet a sinner. Jesus didn’t invite Matthew into a discipleship program which would change his status from sinner to believer after Matthew passed his discipleship exam. After Matthew’s encounter with Jesus, he was still a sinner and a saint at the same time.

Many of us avoid going to the doctor for various reasons. Most often, we avoid these appointments because we have a pretty good idea of what the doctor may tell us. And some physicians don’t use words to soften the blow of what we may need to hear. All metaphors have their limitations, and this is about as far as Jesus’ comparing sinners to a sick person comes to an end. Sinners are like the sick in that we are unable to make ourselves well. Nor is it Jesus’ goal to improve your life. Followers of Jesus are often found carrying crosses of various kinds of suffering in this life rather than boasting of clean bills of health and successes because they had followed the right prescriptions for a better life. The life Jesus gives is a new life, and he gives it to sinners who hear Jesus’ sweet words of mercy.

You have been made a disciple today by following Jesus to this place where Jesus has come close to you today and has given you the remedy that all sinners need to hear, “Your sins are forgiven”. Amen