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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
6/8/2008, for Pentecost 4A  
Matthew 9:9-26

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>9</sup>As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

I think that the greatest thing that can happen to us on the face of this old earth is this: that Jesus should pass by, pause, and bid us to follow him. In such a call consists all our protection in this world and all our adventure. Such a call can turn a fisherman into an apostle, a tax collector into an evangelist.

Here we are, let us say, mending our fishing nets by the side of the sea. We've done it all our lives. We learned to do it from our ancestors, who fished and mended their nets all their lives. Behind us, in the many years gone by now, we have our years of drudgery and our moments of victory. We have done our right fair share of good deeds, but also our fair share of bad deeds. We have served our neighbors and our family by lives of quiet labor, and we have served ourselves — perhaps overmuch — by little luxuries, self-indulgences, drunkenness, or gluttony. Altogether, we have been Man, we have been Woman — glorious and but a little lower than the angels — but also Fallen Man, Fallen Woman — a heartache to angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim, and to Him who is Lord of all, even our Maker.

Yes, we have been mending our nets by the side of the sea and suddenly we look up and there stands Jesus who bids us to leave our nets and follow him. Nothing can be better than this: that Jesus should be willing to count us his friends and should desire that we walk with him henceforth and help him build his Kingdom.

In middle age, Hermann Melville became a tax collector, like St. Matthew in this morning's Gospel story. He was forty-eight years old. He had already written that novel we so much love and admire, *Moby Dick*. But the public back then seemed not to care for that book and it did not sell. Melville's marriage was unhappy and his oldest son, Malcolm, had died. Melville seemed to want a change, and he managed to obtain a position as a customs house collector here in New York City, which post he held for nineteen years.

Now, imagine if Jesus had walked by Melville's tax office, paused, looked into the office, and bid Melville walk with him. If we knew as little about Melville at that point as we know about Matthew, then all we would know is that Jesus had summoned a tax collector to be one of his disciples. But the truth would have been that Jesus was summoning into his apostolic band a man of much talent and much experience of life. Indeed, Jesus would have been summoning a man who has much to give to the building of the church and to the building up of God's kingdom.

So it is whenever Jesus bids a person to come to him. Whether that person is old or young, male or female, without regard to any of the distinctions this world might think important: when Jesus bids a person come to him, that person has something to contribute to heaven's cause here on earth. And you, my friends, are summoned by Jesus. You are bid to join the apostolic band.

Our baptism is our greatest treasure on this old earth. Do not let it lie fallow, like fertile soil that is never turned to any good purpose. The glorious thing about baptism is that it reproduces in your life this morning's Gospel story about the call of Matthew. Indeed, Baptism lets you take your place in the role of Matthew. Jesus is risen, triumphant over death. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is the one who bids you to come to him, take his yoke upon you, and find rest for your souls.

As for the one being baptized, heretofore, you have been doing whatever you have been doing. But when you are baptized, Jesus beckons you and says as he said to Matthew, "Follow me." And the joy of life is that you should answer as did Matthew of old: he rose and followed Jesus.

Lisa Roberts recently mentioned to me that she still remembers that little gesture by which our dear preceding pastor, Raymond Schulze, beckoned to her to rise from her pew and come forward for her baptism. I bet Maggie Luther remembers that too, for she was baptized little more than a year ago now, February 18, 2007, Transfiguration Sunday. She might remember that gesture when after the sermon and during the baptismal hymn, I beckoned to her to come forward and to join me at the baptism font.

The wonderful thing is that at that moment, Maggie was being beckoned by Jesus to come and follow him. As for me, I am simply an "earthen vessel," as St. Paul puts it. I am but one through which Jesus himself accomplishes his good will here on earth.

Though the whole world should pass you by and not invite you to join the quest, Jesus does not pass you by. He does not leave you behind, but bids you follow him.

King Arthur summons his knights to yon quest, and off go Sir Gawain, Sir Lancelot, Sir Perceval, and all the rest. But you do not go off with them, because you have not been summoned by the king.

Historian Joseph J. Ellis in his recent book *American Creation*<sup>1</sup> mentioned that in the English army, George Washington would probably have risen to no higher a military rank than captain, and the brilliant American Major General Nathanael Greene (1742-1786) probably would not have made the officer corps at all. Why? Because they did not have the proper pedigree, education, or experience. If they had been in the English army, they would have had no one like Jesus to pause before them and bid them into his service.

But Jesus bids *you* into service. St. Matthew had nothing of which to boast. The Gospel mentions nary a word about his qualifications for discipleship. All that matters is that Jesus paused and bid him come, and Matthew came. And in the coming, life became extraordinary for that man.

Jesus has the right to bid us to himself. In this world, sometimes we encounter charismatic people who seem to have the power to bid others to follow them, and they follow. This world has its Rasputin, Hitler, Stalin, Jim Jones, Charles Manson, and all kinds of petty masters. But Jesus is the true and trustworthy Master. Others might call us, but then not know what to do with us. But when Jesus calls a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, he launches that person out on a great mission of love in this old world. And Jesus swears to protect us in that mission. He swears by his own body and blood to protect us in that good mission.

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<sup>1</sup> *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic*. By Joseph J. Ellis. 283 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

And now, the joy of this morning's Gospel Lesson reaches its pinnacle right before our eyes. For this same Jesus of old, who paused before Matthew and bid him come, now pauses before one of our little ones, and bids her come to him. I speak of little Lily O'Connor Daniel, born March 25, 2008, to be baptized now. We do not need time travel to transport us back to those Biblical days of Jesus calling a disciple. Rather, we are permitted now to witness the very thing. Lily is coming to Jesus. Lily is coming to the One who is worthy above all others that we should come to him and return to him if we should have fallen away. Indeed, Lily is coming to our very Lord and Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.