

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, September 29, 2023
Matthew 9:9-13
The Call of Matthew

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

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 9:9-13, RSV
In last week's reading, Jesus healed a paralytic. Now, he calls one of his twelve disciples: St. Matthew

⁹As 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.

¹⁰And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

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

Last week, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man, he did so simply by speaking — speaking in his commanding way:

...he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, take up your bed and go home." ⁷And he rose and went home. (Matthew 9:6-7, RSV)

Now, in this evening's reading, Jesus again speaks in his authoritative way¹:

⁹As 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. (Matthew 9:9, RSV)

¹ A nice point made by Matthew Henry: Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Modern Edition, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1991 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.

Jesus speaks to the paralytic, and the man stands up and goes home. Jesus speaks to Matthew, and the man up and follows him. I think we can be pleased to think about this power in the words of Jesus because, one day, in the New Jerusalem, this same Jesus is going to pass by you and me and call us to follow him, and then we will have no more doubts or hesitancy or wandering minds or fickle wills, but we will simply up and follow Jesus. We will follow him in a pure and unwavering way, henceforth, for eternity. In our present life, following Jesus is sometimes hard, and we too often follow by fits and starts. But a day is coming when we will see Jesus for ourselves. We will not live simply by faith, but also by good, old-fashioned sight. We will see Jesus, he will bid us to come with him, and it will be easy and joy for us to do so. It is something good to look forward to, while we follow now with as much integrity as we can.

So, in this evening's reading, Jesus calls Matthew. In calling that man, he is calling an unlikely disciple. Matthew was a tax collector. He was a member of a disreputable lot! Matthew was a Jew, probably of the house of Levi. Jews who served as tax collectors were considered by their fellow Jews to be traitors. They had sold their souls to Rome for the sake of money. And some of them indeed made a lot of money. They did so by charging more in tax than was actually due, and they pocketed the extra. Take Zacchae'us, for example. That man too was a tax collector. He was the one who was short of stature and so climbed a tree to be able to see Jesus better. As I read the lovely story, note the wealth that Zacchae'us had accumulated:

¹He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. ²And there was a man named Zacchae'us; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. ³And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. ⁴So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. ⁵And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchae'us, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. ⁷And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸And Zacchae'us stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10, RSV)

So Zacchaeus admits that he might have defrauded people. Well, that was the general reputation that those ancient tax collectors had. Matthew, then, had two strikes against him: He was a Jew who had sold his soul to Rome and he was a member of a profession with a bad reputation. Yet Jesus called the man to be one of his disciples.

Righteous folks protested about this. The Pharisees — those earnest preachers of God's holy law — complained to the disciples of Jesus:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:11, RSV)

I guess they counted the tax collectors as being examples of lost humanity and wanted them to stay lost. But not Jesus. He does not want people to remain lost. And so this complaint of the Pharisees becomes the occasion for one of the most beautiful sayings in the Bible:

¹²But when he [Jesus] heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Think of St. Paul. Jesus did not wait for Paul to become a saint. He called Paul while that man was right in the midst of persecuting the church. He called Paul while the man was raging. Paul remained grateful for this for the rest of his life, and so we have his testimony:

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:9-10, RSV)

Likewise now with Matthew. Jesus does not wait for Matthew to repent and turn away from his unjust office. Rather, he calls the man when he is full stride at his wicked work. Jesus calls Matthew out of his tax office into a better way of life. Jesus seems not to be appalled by sinners. Rather, he looks at them and calls them to join him. He bids them to be his friends. He bids them to walk with him in holiness of life.

I am glad for these stories of the call of Matthew and the call of Paul. I figure that if Jesus can call sinners, then that is good news for you and me. And he does call sinners. He certainly does! Jesus calls you and me today, to draw even closer to him. He looks at us and is not undone by what he sees, but rather calls us to come to him, the Great Physician of body and soul, even

Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.