

“Follow Me”

Matthew 9:9-13

The last few weeks I have mentioned how the organizers of the three year lectionary series put it together, that the Old Testament and Gospel readings are generally closely aligned thematically, and the Epistle readings walk us through the 13 letters of Paul and some of the other authors. Then you have other readings assigned for various days celebrating significant events or the lives of certain saints.

Historically, I haven't varied into saints' days too often. However, as September 21 is the day in which the church commemorates St. Matthew, the Apostle and Evangelist (that is, writer of the Gospel), I felt compelled to focus on him for a couple of reasons. One, as we are celebrating the Rite of First Communion this week, the call of Matthew fit better than the parable of the Unjust Manager (which was the appointed reading for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost).

Also, I felt compelled to preach on these texts, because after closer examination of the three year lectionary series, it came to my attention that the call of Matthew to be a disciple does not show up other than on the Festival of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. Which means that I have never preached on this text before. I found that surprising, and needing to be remedied.

Matthew, as we all know, was a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised by most of the Jewish people, even though the tax collectors were Jews. Rome used local people to collect taxes, and gave them the authority to over-tax whomever they wanted and keep the overage. It was a license to steal.

Matthew would have been a wealthy man. His father most likely paid the Roman officials a tidy sum of money to get him that position. Walking away from that life was no small thing. It would cause conflict with his father – in the same way Martin Luther leaving Law School (which his father paid a tidy sum of money for him to attend) caused conflict within the family.

It seems that there is other conflict which demands more attention. The conflict which the guilt of sin brings to the soul of a man who hears the Law and Gospel of God must be confronted.

When we look at the call of Matthew, put out of your mind this romantic concept of Jesus seeing the potential of this sinner – the diamond in the rough (as if he is Aladdin – if you aren't familiar with the reference, ask your grandkids).

Matthew is a lost sheep. Matthew is a part of the hard-headed, hard-hearted, stubborn children of Israel to whom Ezekiel was sent after he ate the scroll which God gave to him. Matthew is among those whom Jesus describes as the sick who are in need of a physician.

Matthew is a blatant and deliberate sinner. Matthew is a tax collector in Capernaum where Peter, Andrew, James, and John live. We can only speculate, but that may have brought up additional conflict also. The solution to all of this conflict is repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance by Matthew means leaving his tax collector booth forever. He is turned from the life of legal stealing he had known. Jesus forgives him. Repentance by Matthew will require forgiveness from Peter, Andrew, James, and John – among others. The wording in our text is very clear, “many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and His disciples.”

They were eating together. In the ancient world, and even to this day in certain cultures, this was significant. You did not just eat with anyone. If you went into someone’s home and ate with them, it meant that you were publicly acknowledging that if there was any conflict in the past, all was forgiven. If someone came into your home and ate, that person was under your protection the same way any blood relative would be – and to the same degree.

If you eat with someone; if you break bread at a table with someone, the life of that person is to be thought of as having the same value as your own son or daughter, or your mother or father. Think of what Lot did when the men of Sodom made demands concerning the two visitors who were inside his home and under his authority. He offers his own daughters to them. Thankfully, the angels intervened and struck the men blind.

Whether you are coming to the Lord’s Table and receiving the body and blood of Christ for the first time, or whether you have been coming here for decades, the understanding of the complete nature of forgiveness should never be overlooked.

When you come and eat at the Lord’s Table, your Father in heaven sees you as His true child. Now, you are His true child already because He has adopted you in the waters of Baptism, but the ancient and unchanging

meaning of what gathering for a meal means should never be discounted because, in America, we will eat with anybody.

We gather together as one – confessing our common faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, confessing our sins and hearing the sweet words of the Absolution, coming to the Lord’s Table as a public confession of faith in Christ’s words “This is My Body” and “This is My Blood” given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

For those who are partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ for the first time (tomorrow/today), this is really big deal as you are getting to participate in a miracle and receive the flesh and blood of the Son of God. For those of you who have been partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ for decades, this is really big deal as you are getting to participate in a miracle and receive the flesh and blood of the Son of God.

Like Matthew, you were a lost sheep. You were the hard-headed, hard-hearted, stubborn child of Adam whom Jesus describes as the sick who needed a physician. We are the sinners whom Jesus came to call to faith. Having been adopted in the waters of Baptism and invited to the Table of our Lord, we come before Him with a oneness of faith and confidence that He has resolved all of the conflict which would keep us from standing before Him in righteousness. Like Matthew, Christ our Lord has come to you and simply said, “Follow Me.” Amen.