

+ Third Sunday After Pentecost: June 21, 2020 +
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin
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"Jesus calls 'Matthews' into his Kingdom and Service"

If you're looking to hire someone, you want them to be qualified, right? If you want to hire an attorney to make sure your will and estate plan is all neat and buttoned down, what are you going to look for? You're probably going to, at a minimum, want someone who has passed their state bar exam and is licensed to practice law in your state. You're probably also going to look for someone with experience in writing legal estate plan documents. Then you might look for other qualities on top of that - a kind person, good listener, or any others you might come up with. We want to hire people who are qualified. Now, imagine that you're Jesus -- and you need to seek out people who are going to tell the world what you've done. What kind of people would you seek out for that role? That's what we'll see as we look at today's gospel lesson.

Matthew 9:9-13 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth. He said to him, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him. **10** As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples. **11** When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" **12** When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. **13** Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus has begun his public ministry in the area of Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing. Today he's heading out from Capernaum when he sees **a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth**, and there, Jesus called Matthew to follow him -- to be his disciple and one to carry his Word to the world. That's who he chose -- a tax collector! Not exactly what we would expect, is it? It's kind of like hiring someone from the IRS to be your public relations guy. Except in Jesus' day it was worse. Tax collectors were known for cheating -- collecting far more than they needed to. Because they cheated, they were often wealthy, while the vast majority of the population was poor. Put this together and tax collectors were regarded as cheats and resented because of their ill-gotten wealth. They were societal outcasts. And Jesus called one to follow him!

But Matthew didn't care. Our Savior's gracious call and invitation led him to get up from his tax collector's booth and follow Jesus. And he was so happy and grateful. We know this because he had a dinner party with Jesus at his house soon afterwards. And not only was Jesus invited, there were also many other tax collectors there, and people from a group that was called the "sinners." The 'sinners' were a group of people who bore that label usually because either they had flagrantly violated the law of God - in things like adultery, prostitution, and dishonest tax collecting, -- or because they didn't care to follow the Pharisees' interpretations of their Scripture, customs, and traditions. The 'sinners' had been barred from the synagogue and were religious outcasts. So at this dinner party was

Jesus and his disciples along with Matthew and many of his friends, just about all of them outcasts, just like he was.

The Pharisees see all this taking place, and they scoff. They can't believe that someone like Jesus who many believed to be sent from God, would not only associate with these kind of people, but eat with them! As he always does, Jesus has a ready response: He says, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this verse means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.** Jesus wants to make two things clear to these Pharisees: The first is why he had come. It was to save sinners, plain and simple. These people, the tax collectors and sinners, knew they were sick with sin, so Jesus was going to spend time with them as the healer of body and soul. That's why he came in the first place. He came to invite people into a saving relationship with him, so that they might know him as their Savior, Redeemer, and Friend. Together with that, he wants to show the Pharisees that they're not as healthy in their soul as they think they are. That's why he quoted from Hosea, **"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."** They prided themselves on their adherence to the traditions and rules that had been handed down, but their hearts had no mercy for people who were lost in their sin. This made them just as lost in their sin as those they looked down on, but worse, they were in denial and couldn't see it.

His point is just as heavy for us to think through today. Jesus repeatedly calls 'Matthews' into his kingdom. He repeatedly calls people who are broken by sin to join him in his kingdom. He calls people from all walks of life and all strata of society -- rich, poor, white, black, young, old, and everywhere in between. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This section, though, makes a special point of saying that Jesus calls people like Matthew into his kingdom. That is to say that he calls people who might be considered societal outcasts -- whether that's outcasts socially whom our society has turned away from, or whether it's outcasts religiously who aren't living according to God's will. It doesn't matter to Jesus. He's come to save them all. There is no one who is outside of Jesus' love and desire to save, because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And he does. He calls 'Matthews' into his kingdom.

So do you know a 'Matthew'? Someone who is kind of an outcast? It can be a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, or a family member. Maybe it's someone you know who has done something really dumb and really wrong and they're kind of afraid to show their face in public because of it. Maybe it's someone who has run with the wrong crowd and got mixed up in drugs and alcohol abuse. Maybe it's someone who is currently living a lifestyle that is outside of God's will. Maybe it's someone who just can't get out of his/her own way and keep a steady job for more than a few months at a time. Maybe it's someone who is socially awkward who talks too much or not enough, who doesn't listen or can sometimes be a little rude. Maybe it's someone who dresses funny or kind of smells. Or the kind of person who's always coming to you for food and gas money but always has plenty for beer and smokes. You get the idea. Do you know a 'Matthew'?

I'm sure we all can think of at least one. But the real question is, how would you react if your 'Matthew' showed up here on a Sunday morning? If he or she came back again and

again and sat up front where you'd always see him? If they wanted to go through adult confirmation and become a member here? How would you handle that? To be honest, you really won't know until it happens. And it's not easy. But know that if you and I entertain the thought that some people don't belong in church because of who they are, where they've been and what they've done, that kind of thinking puts us more in line with the Pharisees, with hearts that have little mercy for people who are lost in sin.

Hearts that have little mercy for others have forgotten something -- how much mercy all of us have needed from God. When we look at ourselves from God's eyes, one thing becomes clear: every one of us is a 'Matthew'. We've all messed up in one way or another. The Bible says that each and every one of us is born sinful with a mind that is hostile to God. This truth is called "original sin." Original sin is the great equalizer, because it sets every human being on the same plane before God. It reminds us that we're all born with the same seed of sin and evil in our hearts, and that often the biggest thing that separates those who have messed up from those who haven't isn't so much desire as it is opportunity. We're all sinful by nature and in our thoughts, words, and actions. Therefore we all deserve to be outcasts -- banished and treated as outsiders of the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus shows us mercy. He calls 'Matthews' into his Kingdom. He's in the business of calling and saving people who aren't worthy, people who know their sinfulness. Every one of us is a 'Matthew'. Every one of us is the outsider that Jesus brings in. It doesn't matter how badly you've messed up your life. How is that possible? Jesus came to this earth and he took our place. He welcomed the outcast, the reject, the black sheep, and the forgotten and he did it perfectly in our place. He was born without sin and lived the most beautifully complete life. When he died on the cross, he took all of our sin on himself, including all the times that we were short on mercy, and he died under its curse. Because of this, we're forgiven. On that cross, Jesus cried out "my God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He became the outcast so that we could be brought in. He was the one rejected so that we would be accepted. And his mercy is so great that even if you and I were a hundred -- even a thousand times -- worse than we are, our sins are no match. His mercy is always more. He became a 'Matthew' so that we 'Matthews' are all welcomed to the table in God's Kingdom.

And his mercy doesn't stop there. Jesus didn't just call Matthew into his kingdom. No, now everyone who cracks open a Bible knows his name. Matthew wrote down the big events of Jesus' life so that we can have his eyewitness account of it all. And then there's Paul. He calls himself a blasphemer, prosecutor, and violent person. He oversaw the deaths of many Christians. But God called him to be his missionary, and through his work thousands of people came to know Jesus. And the Bible is full of examples just like them. He doesn't just show us mercy to let us in, but then relegate us to the corner like second-class citizens who should consider ourselves lucky or blessed just to be there. He calls us into his service too. He wants all his 'Matthews' to represent him in the world. All of it is to say, "I'm the kind of God who saves sinners."

So what about you? Can you be a Matthew? Someone who God calls into his kingdom and service? There's one answer to that question: Yes you can. Now, not everyone is called to

be an Apostle like Matthew was. Not everyone is called to be a pastor or teacher. But some of you could be -- have you thought about it? At the same time, we are all called to serve him in our various stations in life and in our congregation. We serve him by being faithful parents, respectful children, honest workers, and compassionate, gracious neighbors. We can serve him by teaching Sunday School, welcoming people to worship, visiting others, or just getting involved with ministries. There are lots of other ways too. Jesus calls Matthews like us into his service.

Yes, you can be a Matthew -- not because you've never messed up, but because those who know the depth of God's mercy in Christ are especially equipped to share it. Not because you meet every last qualification, but because Jesus' strength and power shines through all of our unworthiness. Not because you and I are so great, but because our Savior is so great. He makes you and me worthy and competent to serve in his name.

So what kind of people does Jesus call into his kingdom and service? In his mercy, he calls sinners. He calls people like Matthew and people like you and me. People who know their sin and trust their Savior. Amen!