

Rev. Morgan Gates
Christ the King - Rice Village
Feast Day for Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist
Matthew 9:9-13

There are some moments in Scripture that seem almost too simple to be true.

Jesus walks by a tax booth. He sees a man named Matthew sitting there. And Jesus says, simply, "Follow me." And Matthew gets up and follows him.

No interview or résumé or references.

No theological examination.

No background check.

Just: *Follow me.*

It is a remarkably short story about a remarkably consequential invitation.

And perhaps that is precisely why the church has remembered Matthew for two thousand years. Because Matthew's story is not fundamentally about what he had accomplished before Jesus found him. It is about what happened when Jesus found him.

So let's start there - exactly where Jesus found Matthew: The tax booth.

Tax collectors in the first-century Roman world occupied an uncomfortable social position. They were part of an economic system that extracted money from their own people on behalf of an occupying imperial power. Whatever the particular circumstances of Matthew's work, the tax booth represented a complicated intersection of money, power, politics, and social distrust.

And Jesus walks directly toward it.

That matters. Because Jesus does not wait to approach Matthew until he's done working. Jesus doesn't wait to meet with Matthew somewhere religiously respectable. Jesus goes to Matthew in the midst of his messiness. The place where Matthew's economic life, social identity, and moral reputation all intersect. And Jesus says, *Follow me.*

Martin Luther insisted that God's grace meets human beings in the midst of ordinary life. Not after we have become sufficiently spiritual. Not once we have escaped the complications of economics and vocation and politics and family and ambition.

No, God comes to us in the midst of all life's complications. Grace does not wait for a clean slate or perfect credentials, and neither does Jesus.

Many of us have spent a significant portion of our lives acquiring expertise. We have learned how to analyze. We have learned how to manage complexity.

We have learned how to distinguish reliable evidence from bad evidence, serious arguments from superficial ones, expertise from mere opinion. Those are good things. Indeed, they are gifts!

However, there is a particular temptation that accompanies education, professional achievement, and social privilege:

We can begin to imagine that everything important about a person can be explained by their credentials. We can unconsciously divide the world into people who have earned their place at the table..and people who have not. People whose lives seem coherent and respectable...and people whose lives seem like problems to be solved.

Matthew's story disrupts that instinct because Jesus does not begin with Matthew's qualifications.

Jesus begins with **relationship**, saying: *Follow me*.

The call of Christ is not an award for having become impressive. It is an invitation to become available to God.

Then comes the scandal of the table. Matthew hosts dinner at his home with "many tax collectors and sinners," and Jesus is there with the rest of the disciples as well!

The Pharisees take note, and they ask Jesus's disciples why their teacher eats with such people. It is a revealing question.

Notice that they do not ask, "What is Jesus teaching?" They ask, "Why is Jesus eating with *them*?"

That is often how exclusion works. It is not always an explicit declaration that someone is unworthy. Sometimes it is simply a question about proximity.

Why are you with those people? Why are you listening to them? Why are you sharing a table with them?

Jesus answers the Pharisees with one of the most important sentences in the Gospel:

He says that “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick [do]. And then: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” is Jesus' reminder to the Pharisees - and each of us - that things become distorted when they are severed from mercy.

It is the distortion that causes those who have great need of a physician believing that they are healthy and well. They are religiously serious and know the rules and understand the boundaries. They know who belongs and who doesn't. And it is precisely those things that make them ill.

But Jesus introduces a different way of understanding the world. Jesus makes it clear that **all of us need mercy**. We are, after all, people who confess *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and sinner.

We are capable of extraordinary goodness. And we are capable of extraordinary self-deception. We can be generous and still be self-interested. We can advocate justice and still protect our own advantages. We can love our neighbors and still draw boundaries around who counts as a neighbor.

Thankfully, The gospel does not require us to pretend we are otherwise. It tells the truth about us and our *simul iustus et peccator* nature. And then it tells us an even greater truth: that Christ comes for us anyway and says: *Follow me*.

That call to: *Follow me*, is a lifeline for Matthew the tax collector. Jesus does not simply forgive Matthew and send him back to his old life. He calls him through his love and grace - and that creates vocation. The person sitting at the tax booth becomes a disciple. And, then that disciple becomes an apostle and an evangelist.

Matthew, who was once known for collecting, becomes someone remembered for proclaiming. The person associated with taking becomes associated with giving. The person who sat behind a table becomes one who helps invite others to the table.

That is what grace does. It does not merely improve our self-image. It reorients our lives.

It reorients our lives and forces us to face an uncomfortable question:

Who are the people Jesus is asking us to see?

Not as a problem. Not as demographic categories. Not as political constituencies. Not as recipients of our charity. But as people.

People with names. People whose lives are complicated. People who, like us, need mercy. People whom Christ may already be calling.

The Feast of Saint Matthew is therefore not really a celebration of Matthew's exceptional goodness. It is a celebration of Christ's extravagant mercy. Matthew did not become an apostle because he had first demonstrated that he deserved the invitation. He became an apostle because Jesus called him. And the same is true of each of us and the church.

We are not gathered here because we have successfully assembled a community of people who have figured out God. We are here because Christ has gathered people who need mercy:

And Christ says to all of us: *Follow me.*

Not, "Become impressive enough."

Not, "Understand everything first."

Not, "Clean up your life and then come."

Simply: *Follow me.*

And then, somehow, miraculously, impossibly, there is a table. And there is room for us all.

So perhaps the question Matthew leaves with us today is not: "Am I worthy?" The gospel has already answered that question. Nor is it: "Who deserves to be here?" That question belongs to another economy. The question is: **Where is Jesus calling us to follow?** And: **Whom is Jesus asking us to see?** And: **What would mercy require of us there?**

For Matthew, following meant leaving the tax booth. For us, it may mean leaving behind an assumption. A prejudice. A comfortable distance. A need to be right. A fear of people whose lives are unfamiliar. A conviction that our success is entirely our own achievement. A reluctance to admit that we, too, are among those who need the physician.

The Feast of Saint Matthew reminds us that the gospel does not begin with our ability to find Jesus. It begins with Jesus finding us in the complicated places where our lives actually happen. And there Christ says: *Follow me.*

So let us follow.

Let us follow the one who chooses mercy. Let us follow the one who crosses boundaries. Let us follow the one who sits at tables we might have avoided. Let us follow the one who sees a human being where the world sees a category.

And let us follow him to the table where none of us arrives because we have earned our place.

We arrive because Christ has invited us.

And there, with Matthew and with sinners and saints, with the confident and the uncertain, with those who understand and those who are still learning, we discover the deepest truth of the gospel:

The table is not a reward for the righteous.

It is where Christ gathers us all, sinners and saints.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.