

Aug. 2, 2020 -- (Pentecost 10, St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist)

Sermon Text – Ephesians 2:4-10; Matthew 9:9-13

- As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him...When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." –

- For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God... -

If Jesus' intention, in calling Matthew to be one of his disciples, was to choose someone who would eventually tell his story by writing one of the gospels, then the tax collector was a poor choice. At least, that's what the Pharisees would have supposed. Tax collectors were not well thought of. They had a bad reputation. They were regarded as "enemies of the people." The reason for this is that they were "consorting with the hated government authorities." They were the servants of Rome. They were the representatives of the occupying empire. As such, they were seen as the instruments of oppression. They were literally the hands and feet of foreign tyranny. They were the means by which the power of Rome was brought down upon the necks of the Hebrew people. That, and their relative positions of authority left them open to corrupt and unjust practices. The system, as I understand it, worked something like this. The Romans gave them quotas or guidelines for the amount of funds they expected to be raised in a certain area. As goods moved from place to place and services were provided for those in need, the tax collectors were to collect the required Roman fees. In addition, they were given leeway to add on their own commissions. Some may have done so reasonably, but others probably added exorbitant sums. Most viewed the fees as unfair, given that the taxes were seen as unreasonable in the first place. In other words, tax collectors were considered unworthy of religious respect. They were unclean, unfair and unworthy. But Jesus, seeing Matthew at his tax booth, calls him to follow, nonetheless. And immediately, Matthew gets up from his table, leaves his work, and begins to follow.

And then he does something even more significant. He invites Jesus to his house for a meal, to which he also invites many of his friends, other tax collectors and similar "lowlifes," with whom tax collectors are likely to associate, those who are called "sinners" in the text. I can't tell you specifically to whom that term refers. I can only suggest that these were people who were equally viewed as equally unclean, perhaps also as unfair, and certainly just as unworthy as were the tax collectors. And

this simple act of hospitality gives Jesus the opportunity to set forth his personal statement of purpose. When the Pharisees ask his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” He responds by declaring, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Jesus wants to make this very clear. He came for people like Matthew. He came for people like Matthew’s sinful friends. He came for people who are sinners, like you and like me. And that’s good news for us. Matthew wants it to be clear. Jesus did not come for the people who are good, or who are religious, or who are righteous. Jesus came for the sake of people who are sinful. Just as physicians treat people who are sick, so Jesus is here for people who need what he has to offer. And that doesn’t happen because people are good or clean or worthy. It happens because Jesus offers us forgiveness and grace and mercy.

But here’s the problem. Are we really the tax collectors and sinners of our day? Or are we more like the Pharisees – the good, religious, and righteous people of our time? I mean look around yourself, who do you see? I don’t mean right now, because you’re probably watching or listening in your home, and you’re likely to mostly see the members of your own family. But, look this week, when you happen to venture out and about. Then, who do you see? Are they good, respectable citizens? Or are they despised, the disreputable and the disgraceful? And if they are, then who are they? In our sharply divided society of today, well, it seems to me like it depends on who you are. Are the despised represented by the white police officer who kneels on the neck of a black person, cutting off his air and stopping his breathing until he’s dead, and his fellow officers who let it happen? Or are they represented by those who use the resulting outrage to smash windows, burn buildings, loot stores, and turn peaceful protests into violent and chaotic rioting? Are they the public health officials and government leaders who work toward requiring masks to be worn in public places? Or are they the people who show up at Walmart wearing swastika emblazoned face masks, or refuse to wear any face covering at all when they gather at large events like parties, concerts, or rodeos? Who is it? Are they the parents who want every school to open for in-person, maximum capacity teaching this fall? Or are they the school officials who have already announced that because of the threat of the pandemic, their recommendation is for distance learning to continue at least through most of the fall? Are they the people who advocate for mail-in balloting in our public elections? Or are they the ones who warn against the possibility of widespread voter fraud if voting is allowed to take place by mail? Which is it? I’d like to know. Who are the Matthews of our day? And who are his feasting friends who are sitting at dinner with Jesus? No matter how we might resolve this difficult dilemma, I suggest that there are plenty of candidates to go around. And wherever we look, we

are likely to conclude, like the children in the old “Family Circus” comic strip, that it is “not me!” We don’t want to think that we are numbered among those who are despised, unclean, unjust or the unworthy.

So, this is the hard part of the story. The call of Matthew, the tax collector, to be one of Jesus’ disciples functions like a parable. It’s a story we can set along side of our reality to illuminate something of the truth. But, like most good parables, this one has a twist in it. It does not tell us what we expect. In fact, it reverses the direction. Jesus does not call the good, religious and righteous people of his day, but tax collectors and sinners. He calls the despised, the disreputable and the disgraceful. He calls people who are sick, sinful and self-absorbed. He calls people whom we may not especially like. He calls people who are not good, respectable or worthy. And that’s what intrigues me so much about the Pharisee’s response to Jesus’ actions in this story. By their very questioning of why he eats with tax collectors and sinners, they have placed themselves squarely into that same, despised category. They have shown themselves to be righteous hypocrites, judgmental of others’ actions, but unaware of their own sinfulness. Jesus will make that clear on other occasions. They are righteous according to the laws of their religious teachings, but they are abusing their authority and taking advantage of those who have no way to fight back, especially widows and orphans. The truth is that the good, religious and righteous Pharisees are just as sick and sinful and self-absorbed as are the tax collectors and the sinners. They all need Jesus’ help. Without it, there is no mercy. Without it, there is no grace. Without it, there is no salvation. St. Paul makes this perfectly clear in his Letter to the Ephesians, when he writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” For that we can all be thankful. In calling Matthew, the tax collector, to be an apostle and an evangelist, Jesus has made it clear that he “came not to call the righteous but sinners.” And that’s people like us.

Amen.