

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Jesus Calls Sinners to Follow Him

Dear Friends in Christ,

Jesus has been putting together a good team. He started with a crew that might not have smelled good all the time. But the four fisherman were hard working, loyal and probably good at telling stories. Andrew, Peter, James and John were solid choices to fill one third of Jesus' team of disciples. Next, Jesus found two good prospects in Philip and Nathanael. These were good Jews who knew the Old Testament prophecies of the Christ. Again, solid picks by Jesus.

Jesus headed north with these disciples to Galilee on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. Somewhere in that region he preached what we now call the Sermon on the Mount. It is very likely that there was a man sitting in that crowd, listening to Jesus who did not fit the profile for a disciple of Jesus. Sure, he was a Jew, but he worked for the Romans. He collected taxes to enrich the Roman oppressors. I think this man was in the crowd for the Sermon on the Mount because he records the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel that bears his name, Matthew.

After Jesus heals people, takes a trip across the lake and back, and heals some more, he goes outside of Capernaum by the lake and finds Matthew. Not only does Jesus find Matthew, he calls Matthew to follow him. As I read the gospel lesson again, imagine the surprise and even shock of Jesus' invitation to Matthew. The other disciples would be surprised at this pick to join their team. The religious leaders of the Jews are shocked at this choice. And Matthew is also surprised (in a good way) when Jesus calls a sinner to follow him. We rejoice today because Jesus only calls sinners to follow him.

Matthew 9:9–13 (NIV84)

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew's job was a necessary one in the bureaucracy of the Roman Empire. In order to keep the peace as well as keep the roads in good order and provide safety for travelers and merchants, the empire needed tax revenue. Matthew's job was to collect taxes along the road near Capernaum. He would assess the value of a merchant's goods and collect a percentage of that value. Then the merchant could continue on his way. Matthew would not have to be mean about it. He had the backing of the Roman soldiers in the area to enforce whatever tax or tariff he imposed. For many tax collectors, this power to collect whatever they decided led to collecting far more than was needed to support themselves. Many lived down to the reputation of a greedy, cheating, unethical tax collector. We don't know anything of Matthew's character in this regard. He may have honored God in his role as a tax collector or he may have used his authority to enrich himself.

But every tax collector was seen as an untrustworthy person by the Jews. Not only because of their potential greed, but also because they enriched the Roman oppressors. How could a faithful Jew work for the enemy

rulers? This was the attitude of the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. If they had read the Old Testament a little more carefully, they could have seen examples of God's people faithfully serving pagan kings while remaining faithful to the Lord. Joseph served the Pharaoh. Daniel served the kings of Babylon and Persia. But these examples were ignored and tax collectors were usually removed from the synagogue. So who is Matthew supposed to socialize with if he can't be with Jews who attend synagogue? Other Jews who are not welcome at the synagogue such as adulterers and others who are known to live immoral lives. Or maybe even Gentiles. Therefore, tax collectors get lumped into the group whom the Pharisees simply call "sinners." This was almost a technical term for "those people you don't allow at the synagogue and don't want to associate with."

The other disciples must have been surprised when Jesus called Matthew to be one of the disciples too. But maybe they were used to Jesus doing the unexpected by now. But the Pharisees were not going to let this strange choice by Jesus go unchallenged. They won't challenge Jesus directly but will question the disciples. "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?*" No respected teacher would associate with undesirable sinners. How could a tax collector possibly benefit Jesus?

Might we who are in the church sometimes ask similar questions? How is that person going to benefit our church? Sometimes churches have a certain type of person they are looking for. Of course, it is not stated directly but is implied. We, who are in the Lutheran church of the Midwestern United States used to have a definite type of person we sought out as members – Lutherans with ancestors from Northern European. I don't think that is as true today as it was when Lincoln Heights was founded. But many churches today are looking for the young people, the young professionals with a couple of kids and stable careers. Do we go out and look to fill our churches with single parent households, with people who struggle with alcohol, with people who have served time for a crime, with those who have intellectual disabilities, with the promiscuous and the foul mouthed, with the "sinners" of our day?

There may be times when we have prejudged someone as not being a good fit for our congregation and therefore not invited that person and not opened the door to a spiritual conversation. Jesus encourages us to look at someone deeper than their skin, beyond what they do or say, beyond their life choices and their current conduct. Look to see if that person has the heart of a sinner. If they do, then that person is one for whom Christ died, one whom Jesus wants to call to follow him. For Jesus only calls sinners to follow him. "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*" Only sinners need a Savior.

This was the surprise for Matthew as he sat in his tax collector's booth. Jesus had been around the area for a while. Matthew had likely heard him preach and heard many things about Jesus. Some were saying that Jesus is the Messiah sent from God. But Matthew was not even welcome among the respectable Jewish society. He had no hopes of being accepted by God's Messiah, much less being chosen as one of the disciples. But Jesus calls sinners to follow him. Jesus came to forgive Matthew and all sinners. With the joy of forgiveness through Jesus, Matthew holds a great banquet. He wants to introduce the other undesirables of society, the sinners, to Jesus too. Matthew gets it. He was sick and the Great Physician healed him of his sin. His friends are sick with sin and he wants them all to be healed.

What joy there is for us sinners when Jesus calls us to follow him. Many of us don't remember the day we were called by the Holy Spirit to faith in Jesus. It was many years ago and we were very young at our baptisms. Don't let the fact that you can't remember that call to faith diminish the joy of being called to follow Jesus. If you are a sinner, Christ came for you. If you are a sinner, Christ died for you. If you continue to struggle with

sin in your life (and we all do), Christ continues to call you to follow him. With that gracious invitation, Christ assures us that we are forgiven and that we are still God's own children. Jesus calls us to follow him whenever we hear his word and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. The next time you receive Communion, try this: When the pastor speaks Jesus' words to you, substitute your name for the "you." For example, if I do this exercise it would sound like this in my head. "Take and eat, this is the true body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given for you, Mathew (with one "T"), for the forgiveness of sins....This is the true blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, shed for you Mathew, for the forgiveness of sins."

When Jesus walked up to Matthew at his tax collection station, there was no doubt that Jesus was addressing Matthew when he said, "Follow me." It was not an invitation to everyone who could hear him, but only for Matthew to be a disciple of Jesus. When Jesus comes to you in his Word and in Holy Communion, he comes to you individually with his forgiveness. In our sin, we are tempted to think that Jesus wouldn't want us on his team, that we are not a good fit, that we have nothing to offer to Jesus. Then we think that Jesus' gracious invitation to follow him and receive his forgiveness is for someone instead of us. But Jesus calls sinners. If you are sick with sin, you have a Savior who has called you and will continue to call you to follow him and trust in his unfailing love for you.

We did not sing all seven verses of the opening hymn today, Jesus Sinners Does Receive. The seventh verse expressed the joy and eternal hope of the sinner called to faith in Christ.

Jesus sinners does receive. Even I have been forgiven.

And when I this earth must leave, I shall find an open heaven.

Dying, still to him I cleave-Jesus sinners does receive. (CW 302:7)

Amen.