

St. Peter Lutheran Church + Modesto, California

## The Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 9, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Matthew 9:9-13

<sup>9</sup> *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.*

<sup>10</sup> *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

<sup>12</sup> *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (NIV)*

### Why Matthew? Why Me?

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Jesus,

There's a painting by Italian artist Caravaggio entitled "The Calling of St. Matthew." One the right side of the scene stands Jesus, arm outstretched, a finger pointing. His finger points at another man across the room. It is Matthew. Matthew doesn't see Jesus; he is too busy counting money. But Jesus sees him.

What is fascinating and kind of funny about the rest of the painting, are the other people in the room with Jesus and Matthew. The looks on their faces us that they can't believe what is happening. Two of the men are pointing at Matthew with looks that say to Jesus, "Him? Seriously? You want *him*? Why?"

When Jesus called Matthew into his service, "Why?" was a question on everyone's minds. Matthew, after all, was known as a "sinner." "Why Matthew?" seemed to be a legitimate question. And Jesus answered it.

Of course, we don't want to learn something just about Matthew today. We want to learn something about this Jesus. We want to see how he reacts to Matthew and his sinful, checkered past. We are curious to see what Jesus will do. Why? Not just because we want to learn some Bible trivia, but because each of us is the same kind of person Matthew was. Different in some respects, but at heart the same. We are sinners. Why *Matthew*? A more pointed question is, "Why *me*? Why would Jesus bother with *me*?" It's a good question. And Jesus answers it. Why? Because he loves sinners. "Really?" we ask, incredulously. "Yes, really" he answers, "and I want you to love sinners as I do."

#### Because Jesus loves sinners.

Matthew was a tax collector. The bottom line in the Roman system of tax collection was this: a tax collector had to turn in a certain amount of money to his boss. Whatever he collected over and above that was gravy. He got to keep it. So the tax collectors would try to squeeze as much money as they could out of everybody. It was legalized extortion. The more they took, the richer they got. And people hated them for it. Is it any wonder?

This was Matthew. We have no reason to believe he had been any different than the normal tax collector before Jesus met him. Matthew was the kind of guy your parents taught you to stay away from. The kind they taught you to hate. Dirty and dishonest—he was someone you wished would just go away.

But Jesus didn't go away from him. He saw him and walked up to him. He even talked to him. "Follow me," he said. Just two words. But in those two words Jesus said a number of things that meant the world to Matthew.

First, Jesus' words were a call to repentance. Matthew had followed the lure of money and ill-gotten gain. Greed had been his master. But Jesus' command was a call for Matthew to change the way he thought and acted, to turn away from the sins that had ruled him. Jesus gave to Matthew something more valuable than anything Matthew could have imagined. He gave him forgiveness. Jesus' call to Matthew assured him of that. Jesus invited Matthew to follow him, to trust in his mercy.

Jesus' words also gave Matthew something that he probably hadn't known for years: complete acceptance. Jesus took all Matthew's sins away. Matthew could therefore stand before his God spotless. In the terms we heard St. Paul use in the Scripture lesson, God *justified* Matthew. He pronounced Matthew "not guilty" of any sin. Most of Matthew's society rejected him. But now, miraculously, God had adopted him as a son!

Finally, Jesus' command "Follow me" gave Matthew a special calling. This man, who had experienced the amazing grace of God, was now to devote his life to announcing that grace to others. Instead of taking from people, he would be giving to them. He would be giving something more valuable than all the money he had bilked people out of—enduring life with God.

This incident reveals something about Jesus, something that is at the heart of who he is. Did Jesus know what kind of a person Matthew was? He did. Matthew was sitting right there in the tax collector's booth when Jesus saw him. He knew Matthew was a despised sinner. Yet Jesus intentionally called him. He called him to leave his sin, to believe in God's forgiveness, to embark on a life of service. That's the way Jesus works: he loves sinners.

The call of Matthew should ring as music in our ears. We are sinners too. As bad as Matthew, a dirty crook? Yes. Sin is sin. God's law is demanding. He tells us, "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2:10) We are guilty. We can try to deny it, but Jesus knows the truth. Yet Jesus loves us anyway. With his words to us he has called us from sin to believe in him. He has washed us and has given us a new identity; we are his and not our own. He has called us to serve him and not ourselves.

Why Matthew? Why me? Because Jesus loves sinners.

### **Really?**

If you think this concept through, that Jesus loves sinners, it might raise some questions. When we think about some notorious sinners we know, we might wonder if this is really true. "Does Jesus want American-hating terrorists to be saved? Does God want suicide bombers to go to heaven? Jesus loves sinners—really? *All* sinners?"

These questions aren't new. Some time after Jesus called Matthew, Matthew had a dinner at his house. He invited the people he knew from work: corrupt tax collectors. Matthew draws our attention to these dinner guests. Matthew's friends were commonly referred to as "sinners". They were labeled and looked down on by the "good people" of society. When Jesus came over for dinner, did he know what he was getting into? Yes, he did. There were many such sinners there, not just a few who sneaked in when no one was looking. Here we find Jesus, rubbing elbows with the dregs of Jewish society.

The Pharisees saw this. The Pharisees were very proper people. On the outside they were flawless. People referred to them as "righteous". These were the role models. These were the "good people" of Jesus' day, the ones who were esteemed and respected. As such, they were appalled that Jesus would intentionally go near these people and eat dinner with them. He was acting as if they were his friends. Their question to the disciples is very revealing: "Why does your teacher eat with the tax collectors and sinners?" What reason could Jesus possibly have for doing this? Notice how they refer to Matthew's dinner guests as just a bunch of undesirables: "the tax collectors and sinners". It's how we might say today, "He's hanging around with, you know, *those* people."

Jesus often associated with those that most respectable people didn't. Let me put it in terms we can understand. If a person lived in a nice house in a nice subdivision, and that person invited Jesus over for dinner, would Jesus accept their invitation? Sure. So would we, right? But now imagine that someone who lives, say, over on the southwest side of town invites Jesus over for dinner. They invite him over to

their rat-infested rental unit, next door to a meth lab. Would Jesus go? Yes! Jesus would be just as thrilled to go there and eat dinner with them.

Skeptical? Then read the Gospels. Count how many times you see Jesus talking to someone that everyone else wants to avoid, someone that makes others uncomfortable: a disabled person, someone possessed by a demon, someone with a terminal disease, a hooker, a tax collector, a Roman foreigner, a Samaritan (someone of a different race). The rejects, the ones people were content to ignore—these people gravitated toward Jesus. The Pharisees found this shocking. They had learned to avoid these people, and now this Jesus was deliberately going near them.

Do Jesus' actions surprise you? Do you ever find yourself saying, "God doesn't really care about *all* people, does he? Even terrible sinners?" We, like the Pharisees, often like to play the comparison game. We make ourselves look and feel good by comparing ourselves to others. "Yeah, I'm a sinner, but not as bad a sinner as a drug dealer or murderer." But that doesn't work. If it did, someone who brutally murdered 10 people could say, "I know I'm bad, but at least I didn't fly a plane into a skyscraper and kill 3000 people. I am, let's see, 300 times better than a terrorist." Do you see how ridiculous it is? Yet we fall into the same trap. "I may be a sinner, but I'm not as bad as some people I know about." What the Pharisees didn't admit—and what we sometimes don't—is this brutal truth that God tells us repeatedly in the Bible: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12) Sin is sin. We are sinners too.

Is it really true, then? Does God love *all* sinners? Jesus answers "Yes!" In fact, sinners are the ones Jesus came to save.

### **Yes, really.**

The Pharisees asked their "Why" question of the disciples, but Jesus overheard. Before the disciples could answer, Jesus chimed in: "Those who are healthy don't need a doctor, but those who are sick." Do you see his point? People who think they're righteous and perfect don't care about Jesus. He means nothing to them. Why would a healthy person think he needs a doctor? But if someone is sick, a doctor is crucial. People who see their sinfulness treasure Jesus.

Are you a sinner? Are you spiritually sick? Are you a sinner, by nature a bad person? Then I have good news: Jesus came for you! He makes his point clear: "I did not come to call *righteous* people, but *sinners*." Jesus calls us to believe in him, to believe his promise of forgiveness. And as with Abraham in our lesson today, by believing him, we obtain righteousness. We are cleared of all wrongdoing in God's sight by faith. It's important to see how sinful we are. If we don't, if we think we're good people, then Jesus will mean little to us. But when we realize that we are sinners, we can rejoice, because Jesus came to save us.

God has been merciful to us, and he calls us to show the same mercy. Echoing what we heard in the first Scripture reading today, Jesus says that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Sacrifice is something visible. Mercy is invisible. God doesn't want us just to look or sound good on the outside. God is concerned about the heart. Let's look at our own hearts and see our unworthiness. Then let's take comfort in God's word: "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." He is merciful to us. Let's be merciful to others.

This is what's at the heart of Christianity. We can easily forget that, though. Let's say that you are gravely ill. You go to the hospital seeking help. You look to one of the hospital staff, expecting him to care for you and admit you. Instead he says, "You know, we're really making an effort to keep our hospital nice and clean and free of germs or anything else unpleasant. So could you please come back when you're well again?" Let's say that happened. What would your reaction be? "What?! This is a hospital! What do you mean you don't want any sick people in it? That's what a hospital is for!"

The Christian church is a hospital for desperately sick people. It is not a country club for those who think they're well. The church is not a place for good and righteous people who just need a little advice, some tips on how to be even more successful. The church is a place for those who have failed, for guilty people who need forgiveness.

Those who followed Jesus hoping for a sanitary, pleasant kingdom on earth were, without exception, disappointed. What they found was gathering of the lost and condemned, people whom Jesus had found and acquitted of all their sins. That, in a nutshell, is the Christian church. It is a gathering of those who rely on Jesus for forgiveness and for mercy and for life itself.

Jesus has been merciful to us. Let's reflect the mercy we've been shown. Forget about the color of skin people have or where they live or what kind of life they've led in the past. Love them. Love the outcasts, the marginalized, the ones no one else wants to love. That's the way the Savior operates. Why should his people operate any differently?

Jesus went up to a tax collector named Matthew, and he said, "Follow me."

Why? What moved Jesus? Was it human worthiness? Was it human merit? Was it human potential. No. It was simply the love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus comes to you and me, people just as lost as Matthew, and he says, "Follow me."

Why? Because Jesus loves sinners.

Really?

Yes, really. Amen.