

New Beginnings: Matthew
A Message on Matthew 9:9-13
For Huntsville First United Methodist Church
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Matthew 9:9-13 (NIV)

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.

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

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

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Now let's start off by talking about names because names are important in the Bible. People in the New Testament often had more than one name and the same is true with Matthew. In the scripture reading today from the gospel that bears his name he is referred to as "Matthew." But in the other two synoptic gospels we find Jesus calling a tax collector named "Levi" to follow him.

The scriptures about the calling are so similar, though, that in all probability "Matthew" and "Levi" are the same person. It is believed that "Matthew" is the

Greek adaptation of the Hebrew or Aramaic word which means “gift of God.” Levi, on the other hand, is also Hebrew and may have indicated which tribe this person belonged to. Levi, if you remember, is one of the 12 sons of Jacob (also known as Israel) and the tribe selected to perform the tasks in the tabernacle and later, temple. That’s where we get the name of the book, “Leviticus.”

Although both names of Matthew/Levi have great, positive meanings in the Jewish language, the man Jesus meets at the tax book in the scripture we read today was certainly not viewed by the Jewish people in a positive manner. It was actually just the opposite.

Remember that in the first century the powerful Roman Empire had invaded and occupied the Holy Land. Headquartered in Rome, Italy (thus the name, “Roman”), they were the big dogs of the day. They were the bullies of the playground. Their armies were extremely fierce and well trained and well armed. Nobody messed with the Romans.

It is very rare for an occupying force and the people being occupied to get along very well. This was true in the Holy Land during the first century as well. The Jewish people didn’t like being occupied by the Romans, and the Romans, having the military might and power, wanted the Jewish people to just accept the fact that Rome was in charge, and just behave like an occupied people should. Just don’t cause trouble and everything will be okay.

Now one of the benefits of being an occupying force is that you can force the occupied people to pay you money. You see that throughout the Bible. If you are reading *The One Year Bible* (and I strongly encourage you to) you will find that we just read about that being the case with David when he was king and also with Solomon, his son that succeeded him. The people of the lands they conquered sent gold, silver, and other precious things to the king as tribute.

When Jesus was beginning his ministry in the first century the Roman government demanded payment from the Jewish people. They did this through the implementation of taxes. But instead of assigning the task to Roman soldiers they

made the decision to “sub it out,” so to speak, by hiring Jewish individuals to serve as tax collectors and collect the money from the Jewish people.

Now these tax collector jobs posed some dilemmas for the Jewish people. On the one hand they were very lucrative jobs. As long as the Romans got the amount of money they needed, they didn’t care if the tax collector did a little “over-collecting” and kept a little “something-something” for themselves by charging the Jewish people more than was required by the Romans. Sort of a tax finder’s fee, if you will.

In a society that was primarily agricultural, good-paying jobs were few and far between. The seductive siren song of being a tax collector had to be playing loudly and sweetly in the ears of many in the Jewish community who found the tune financially appealing to their ears.

But the other side of the dilemma is that in becoming a tax collector one is betraying one’s own people. It is conspiring with the enemy. It is treason. While becoming a tax collector had financial benefits, it came at a high cost socially and theologically. If a Jew became a tax collector for the Romans, it was an almost guarantee of being shunned from the Jewish community. One became persona non grata, no longer “one of us.” And this would affect the tax collectors' relationships not only with other Jews, but could also have severe negative impacts on spouses, families, children, parents, and even their religion.

The reality was that there probably were some good, honest tax collectors. But there were also unscrupulous ones, which gave the entire occupation a negative stereotype.

We don’t know if Matthew was honest or not. The scriptures don’t tell us if he was an honest tax collector or one that cheated people out of their money for his own gain. But if we look at other scriptures in the New Testament about tax collectors we can get a better idea of how as a whole they were perceived.

In the 18th chapter of Luke we find Jesus telling the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, and Jesus tells of

a Pharisee and a tax collector both going to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed this: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” Ouch! That doesn’t reflect kindly on tax collectors.

In the 18th chapter of Matthew we find Jesus saying this: “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” – Matthew 18:15-17 Man, that’s pretty rough, isn’t it?

So you can see what the Jewish public attitude toward taxpayers was. It was not good. As we used to say when I was growing up, they’re “lower than the lowest layer of whale bone at the lowest depths of the ocean floor.” (Or something like that.)

We need to understand that so that we can comprehend just how shocking it had to have been when Jesus walks up to Matthew and tells him, “Follow me.” Boom.

Is he crazy? Doesn’t Jesus know about tax collectors? That’s not the kind of people you want as followers. Nope. You want good people, people that are honest, people that are religious and know about... well... you know... religiousy things, right? Surely you don’t want a lowly tax collector!

I have racked my brain to come up with a modern equivalent metaphor to use to help understand just how shocking it must have been for Jesus to call a tax collector to follow him. I thought about something like an auto mechanic performing brain surgery, maybe having one of the hard working sanitation workers that picks up people’s trash being put in charge of air traffic control at George Bush Intercontinental Airport. But those metaphors fail and fall short because being an auto mechanic or a sanitation worker are respectable careers, and I don’t know about you but I really appreciate the work they do. Tax collectors were not viewed as having respectable careers.

And yet Jesus calls a tax collector to follow him. It had to be mind boggling. It was so unheard of in the day, it would have made no sense to anyone. But it made sense to Jesus.

Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, and Matthew does. He experiences a new beginning. A big new beginning. A massive new beginning.

No longer will he be working for the Romans by collecting taxes for them, but he will follow Jesus, going where Jesus goes, listening to what Jesus says, and watching what Jesus does. A new beginning, one with eternal consequences, not only for himself, but for all of humankind. His new beginning is filled with unknowns. There are no books titled, *How to Become A Disciple in Five Easy Steps* with accompanying videos. And yet Matthew is obedient. He follows Jesus.

Jesus' calling of Matthew reminds us of a very important lesson: you never know who God is going to use.

In the book of Esther we read about a young Jewish woman who puts her life at risk by going to the King and telling him about an evil person's plan to kill all her people, all while that very person was in the room with them right then.

We find David being described as a "man after God's own heart" even though he committed adultery and had that woman's husband, one of his loyal soldiers, killed in an attempt to cover up his sin.

As we studied last week, we find Moses, who killed a man and ran away into the wilderness and who also had a speech impediment, being chosen by God to go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelite people out of Egypt.

And in the 22nd chapter of Numbers we find the story of Balaam, a prophet and diviner, who gets saved three times from the angel of God's wrath by his loyal donkey, even though he beats the donkey after every save. God finally gives the donkey language and the donkey says, "Brah, that ain't cool." (Or something like that.)

The late musician Rich Mullins tells the story of a professor talking about the story of Balaam and the donkey, and telling them, “Class, you will forget almost everything I will teach you in here, so please remember this: that God spoke to Balaam through his [donkey], and He has been speaking through [donkeys] ever since. So, if God should choose to speak through you, you need not think too highly of yourself. And, if on meeting someone, right away you recognize what they are, listen to them anyway.”

Except he used another word for donkey. [It’s a three letter word, and it starts with “a.” Which is technically a correct word for *Equus asinus* but which I am not going to say from here in the pulpit lest my late mother shoot down a bar of Ivory soap from heaven and wash out my mouth.]

Rich even wrote a song about Balaam and the different people God uses in the Bible, including Moses and Pharaoh’s daughter. The words to the last three verses of the chorus are:

“And you never know who God is gonna use;
A princess or a baby;
Or maybe even you or me.”

Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to follow him to remind us that being perfect is not a prerequisite to following Jesus.

I have visited with folks who had the misconception that in order to be a Christian, you first have to become righteous. You’ve got to be good before you can follow Jesus. You can’t drink, or smoke, or cuss, or watch R rated movies. You gotta be good first, you gotta be righteous, then you can follow Jesus.

But they have it backwards. We become righteous BY following Jesus! It is through following Jesus that we realize that he doesn’t call perfect people. He calls imperfect people who are made perfect through following him.

Think of it this way. Humans mess up. We sin. Even if we try our hardest not to, we can't help but sin. We cannot approach God, who is perfect and who is sinless, because we are not perfect. We cannot be perfect on our own.

But Jesus, who was perfect, who never sinned, willingly took our place and died the cruel and painful death of a sinner. The perfect took the place of the imperfect. Jesus gave his perfect life for our imperfect one. And he did it so that we, the imperfect, can be made perfect and be able to be in the presence of God.

Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, someone viewed as worse than a sinner, to follow him. Jesus also calls us, with our own issues, with our own imperfections, with our own doubts and fears, to follow him as well. He calls us to new beginnings.

God doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called. Jesus doesn't call the perfect to follow him, he calls the imperfect to take up their cross and follow him, to have a new beginning, leaving their old life and taking up his.

So my challenge to you this week is to remember that we never know who God is gonna use. When we find ourselves looking down on others because of mistakes they have made or because of things they do that we don't like or agree with, let us remember that Jesus called Matthew, a low-life tax collector, and that Matthew, with that new beginning, went on to author one of the gospels in our bible.

And let us remember that no matter what we have done in our lives, no matter what mistakes we have made, Jesus calls us, too.

“And you never know who God is gonna use;
A princess or a baby;
Or maybe even you or me.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.