

GOOD NEWS FOR WRETCHES LIKE ME

Matthew 9:9-13

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 26, 2012

"As Jesus came 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." (Matthew 9:13)

When you hear this story with 21st century ears, you really don't get the full in-your-face impact of a first century listener. Here's what I mean. What if this verse read this way?

"As Jesus came walking along he saw a man named Matthew selling drugs on a street corner and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he left both his drugs and drug money on the sidewalk and followed Jesus."

Back in Jesus' day tax collectors were as despised as neighborhood drug dealers are today. Why? First of all, tax collectors were local people hired by the Roman government to collect the taxes that kept the Roman Empire in business. Think about that. You're a Jew living in Galilee, forced to pay your own hard earned money to pay the salaries of your oppressors! You don't want them in your country, yet you're paying to keep them there! What's more one of your neighbors, in this case a Jew named Matthew, is selling you out by collaborating with your oppressors.

The analogy between a first century Roman tax collector and a twenty-first century drug dealer may be imperfect, but there are similarities. Drug dealers hold neighborhoods hostage. The people who live on the same streets drug dealers work are prisoners in their own homes, especially at night. Who knows when the next shooting will be? Who knows what homeowner will be intimidated next if the police are called? Who knows whose son, daughter or grandchild will be lured into addiction, the drug trade or both?

Get the point? Tax collectors like drug dealer were ruthless. To add insult to injury, they made their salaries by charging a collector's fee, and their fee wasn't cheap. Not surprisingly, tax collectors, like drug dealers, were among the wealthiest men in town, living in the biggest houses and wearing the finest clothes, which made the oppressed and honest folk hate them all the more.

Now, having said all these things, consider this: Jesus invited Matthew the tax collector to become one of his disciples, a member of his inner circle, and then, goes to Matthew's house to have dinner with other tax collectors! Naturally, this is a real turn off to the good people of the community who were systematically victimized and brutalized by Matthew and his friends. That's why the Pharisees questioned Jesus' behavior. **"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"** I'm sure everybody in this room, including myself, would've asked the same question if we lived in Matthew's town and had him for our tax collector.

Hopefully, unlike them we'd come to accept Jesus' explanation. **"Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick... I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."**

Since we're all sinners, let's look closer at Jesus calling Matthew into discipleship and the implications of God's grace and mercy from another perspective. This time he isn't a tax collector, or a drug dealer, in fact this time he's not even Matthew, because now I want you to put yourself in Matthew's place. This is now a story about Jesus calling you.

Jesus, walking along, sees you, doing whatever you normally do that's unethical or hurtful to other people, even so, he says to you, **"Follow me."**

Remember all of us are sinners. That means the perfect intimate relationship God created you to have with him is broken, and you alone, try as you might, can't fix it. You may not be a tax collector or a drug dealer, but in God's eyes, you're just as sinful.

Remember last Sunday when I asked you to read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel this week? If you did, you realize Jesus set the bar impossibly high. Anger is analogous to murder. Simply lusting in your heart is adultery, loving your enemies is mandatory, getting even is forbidden. Even being a worrier is a sin.

So even though you're a basically good and loving human being, no one, except Jesus, is good enough. We all fail the test, no one is righteous, or right with God. That's why we need Jesus. And aren't you glad Jesus is willing to stand up for you whenever anyone questions Jesus for seeking out your company? **"Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick... I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."**

Isn't it amazing that Jesus catches Matthew at his worst, gouging his neighbors for more money, yet right then and there, caught in the act, Matthew was still invited into discipleship? Who but Jesus would hire on the spot such a despicable human being?

It's very possible this wasn't Jesus' first encounter with Matthew, Jesus already had at least one previous conversation with him. Seeds were planted in Matthew's black heart. Even while on the job, collecting taxes, he was struggling with the impact Jesus was already having on his life. It's possible he even spoke with some of his tax collector friends about Jesus, the same ones who later came to dinner to meet and talk with this welcoming and wonderful preacher. How else do you explain Matthew's abrupt decision to leave his tax booth and follow Jesus?

Some of us come to Jesus quite suddenly, others take more time. But one of the things I hope you consider over the next few days is this: Jesus will even call you when he finds you at your worst, even at the moment you're caught in the act. You don't have time to clean up your act, you couldn't get yourself ready or make yourself presentable before you answered, **"Yes, Lord, I'm coming with you, because now I'm fit to be called one of your disciples."** It never happens that way. Again, remember what Jesus said, **"I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."**

Next Sunday we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper. What will we celebrate? Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. You may think "**celebrating**" is the wrong word, maybe we should be saying "observing" the Lord's Supper. How can you celebrate such the terrible ordeal of suffering and death of an innocent man? But you see what we're celebrating is that his suffering served a purpose. His death liberated you and me from the power of sin. You may then ask, then why, if Jesus' death frees me from sin, do I keep sinning, why do I still fail to live up to the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount?

Look at it this way. You've heard me use this metaphor before, but it bears repeating. Here it is again! You're locked in a jail cell, trapped for good with no way out. Suddenly you hear Jesus walking down the corridor unlocking all the cell doors. He finally unlocks your door and says, "**You're free,**" and opens your door. He then says, "**Come on out.**" At first you're ecstatic. You're free to go as you please. But something is holding you back! Even though you hate it in there, in a perverse way it's safe and comfortable. It's the only life you've ever known and stepping out into freedom all of a sudden seems overwhelming and frightening. "How am I supposed to live 'out there' with all this new found freedom? I'll have to change, I'll have to give up my old ways and become responsible. I don't know if I can do it. I think I'll stay where I am."

But Jesus isn't there to keep you locked up. Instead Jesus stands at your cell door encouraging you to step out into the freedom he's already won for you. You may take that step out, but then two steps backward and then another step, then another and another. And all the while Jesus is there with you, encouraging you, loving you and empowering you to step out of your sin and into the full, abundant life.

Listen once again to what Jesus said to the Pharisees who couldn't understand why Jesus kept company with tax collectors and sinners.

"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 spent most of his life with tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, even people like you and me. That should tell us something. When Jesus said to Matthew, "**Follow me,**" he wasn't just calling Matthew to a life of middle class respectability. Instead he invited Matthew, and others like him, to not only grow into the discipleship lifestyle but even bring his friends. That's why Matthew invited the other tax collectors to dinner. So they could meet Jesus and be freed as well.

The Lord's Supper is a celebration of the freedom Christ won for you on the cross.

I never before announced Communion Sunday the week before, but I should. Why? So you and I can become increasingly aware of Christ with us and maybe even consider, as never before, the importance this sacrament has on your life. The Lord's Supper isn't just a religious ceremony, it's really an invitation to remember Jesus and be with Jesus the night before he died on the cross so any sin that keeps us from knowing and enjoying God would dissipate into oblivion.

Last Sunday I asked you to read the Sermon on the Mount. This Sunday I'm asking you to remember the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount who desperately wants to commune with you until you realize that friendship with God isn't only just possible, but foreordained. If God could call Matthew, a despicable, wretched fellow, to be a member of his inner circle and do great things for God and man, isn't it possible God could invite even you to be and do the same? Why not?