

Second Sunday After Pentecost – 2023

Hosea 5:15—6:6

Romans 4:13-25

Matthew 9:9-13

How many of y'all have ever had a bad reputation? How many of y'all have ever dreamed of a clean slate, a fresh start in a place where your history didn't cling to you? I recently read an article about a guy who killed his parents because they wouldn't let him take the car on a date to the drive-in. He was caught, tried, found guilty and imprisoned. Years later, he escaped. Eluding capture, eventually he made his way to Australia and lived a decent enough life. He raised a son to be a good man. After the guy died, the son took one of those genealogy tests which triggered an investigation. The son was informed as to his father's crime. The son had no idea. The murders and the penitentiary were in Nebraska. I imagine that that guy wanted to get as far away from Nebraska as he could. There are things that I like about going back to my hometown. There are things that I don't like. The regrets are pretty stiff. Looking some people in the eye is unpleasant. I mismanaged my gifts. That's a gentle way of saying that I was a felon and everyone knew it. I was a public disgrace. That sort of thing can stick with you, shaping not only others' view of you but your view of you.

Matthew was a dirtbag. He knew it. Everyone else knew it. Matthew was a tax collector. He had allied himself with Rome, a foreign, occupying power in Israel that took money from the Jews to further its own ends. For good reason, Rome was hated. Working on behalf of Rome was viewed as highly immoral. It was viewed as spiritually detestable to conspire with Rome against one's own people. On top of that, the tax rates were vague and indefinite enough for the tax collector to balm his conscience with extra money, to take more than necessary and keep it in order to blunt the pain of being an outcast. Every Jew had a suspicion that the tax collectors were extortionists. They were. Matthew was a public disgrace. The people in Capernaum knew it. Matthew knew it.

How many of y'all would be super comfortable in a *real* biker bar, a Hell's Angels bar? Would you feel at home in the projects, where muggers wait to rob residents in the stairwells? Where pushers and pimps and prostitutes prey on the naïve, prey on the vulnerable and the lost? Do you believe that there are some places that are sicker than other places? Was Matthew's tax booth a sick place? Do you believe that there is any place on this globe where the Lord Christ does not dare to go? Jesus said that the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Is there any domain where the Lord can't identify, can't relate, can't understand or can't reach or can't call one of His own? Is Redlands sicker or less sick than any other place on Earth? Jesus knew exactly what Matthew was. Follow me. Jesus chooses Matthew. Matthew, no longer imprisoned in his tax booth, no longer imprisoned by his reputation or the scandal of his life or the radical confinement of a faithless existence, Matthew rose up and followed Jesus.

Next thing you know, it's a Lutheran potluck. Next thing you know, it's sirloin steaks and Fat Tire Ale. Next thing you know, it's Bordeaux (French) and Cannelloni (Italian) and Tres Leches Cake (Mexican). Matthew throws a party for all his dirtbag friends. It's a hootenanny and Jesus is the guest of honor. No kidding; Matthew, who is likely a wealthy dude, throws a party. Who does he invite? Well, his only friends are other outcasts. Imagine what they're thinking. What?

Matthew's throwing a shindig? That *Rabbi* is going to be there? He called Matthew to be His disciple? Of course we're going! Can't wait to hear about this! A rabbi wants to hang out with us? It's on! That's *exactly* how it happened. Do you think that both Jesus and Matthew wanted these folks to hear Christ speak directly to them, to convey the Father's grace, to reveal the presence of the Kingdom, to draw them into the Light of Life? Do you think that Matthew's house, Matthew's feast bears a pretty close resemblance to this exact moment?

Matthew's house became a church. Why? Christ was there, reclining at table, and speaking to sinners who needed the Word, who needed God's grace, speaking to banished outcasts who He wanted in His kingdom. Jesus ate with sinners. The sinners knew what it meant. The religious stuffed-shirts knew what it meant. Jesus welcomed undesirables, those who failed to meet society's standards, those who didn't pretend to be righteous, those who had genuinely failed to keep God's moral imperatives. Jesus ate with them. He showed Himself not to be above their humanity, not to be repulsed by their failures. Grace; God called Matthew because He is a God of grace. Jesus ate with the rabble because He is a God of grace. The Lord doesn't condone stealing or cheating or lying or adultery or laziness or gluttony or any other vice that inhabits the heart of man. It's a sickness we have, all this sin in our lives. We need a physician. There is only One. Everyone needs this physician, the Good Physician. We're all sick. Believers know it. Unbelievers attempt to deny it.

Some folks think that they don't measure up. Some folks think that they're stuck outside and won't ever be invited in. Why? Because they think that Christianity is about measuring up. Is that us? Do we exclude people because they don't measure up? That's what the Pharisees were all about. They attempt to discredit Jesus to His disciples. They're cowards. They don't go to Jesus directly, but they needle his followers with a carefully crafted question: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matthew 9:11). Why does your teacher have a beer at a biker bar? Why does your teacher visit the projects? Why does your teacher spill His blood for an adulterer? Why does your teacher allow Himself to be crucified for a compulsive liar, a raging addict, a woman of low repute? It's grace; for all of us; it's Divine Love and it is determined to lay claim to us all. No one is excluded. No one is beyond the reach of Christ's call: "Follow me."

Matthew knew that he was sick. I suspect that you know it as well. Dead in trespasses and sins; that's how the bible describes us apart from Christ. You can't get sicker than dead. God's Word diagnoses us aright. The law, the accusing and stern and unrelenting truthfulness of the law diagnoses you and everyone else aright. You are a sinner. You have flaunted God's holiness. You have hurt your neighbor, often those you purport to love. Over and over you have violated God's commandments. Sin is a disease that ends in death. That's not conjecture. That's not some religious figure making an abstract assertion; that is the plain, absolute truth. Sin is an affront to the God who created you. Sin alienates you from the Almighty and puts you at great risk. Who will save you from death? Who will save you from judgment?

Jesus told the Pharisees who were peppering His disciples with questions that they had something to learn. What did they have to learn? After all their study of the Torah, after all their engagement with the sacrificial system, what was the central point that they had missed? Mercy. The Son of God being nailed to a cross is mercy – for everyone. The Son of God giving Himself

up into the hands of men full of hate is mercy; mercy for you. The Good Physician spent His blood to cleanse you from sin, to save you from death, to make you holy and bring you to heaven. Jesus is the priest who offers the sacrifice and He is the sacrifice which is offered. The whole OT points to Him. That's why it was instituted. Christ crucified is mercy – for you and for those in the biker bar and those in the projects and those who fail miserably to keep God's commands. Jesus is health incarnate and He shares His health with you. He draws near to the sick. He eats with Lutherans, which is to say that He eats with sinners.

Matthew; in the books of Luke and Mark, Matthew is called Levi. Matthew means the Gift of God. Did Matthew want a clean slate, to forget that old, rotten life by using a new name? Was the new name something that Jesus gave to Levi? Was it hard for Matthew to go back to Capernaum and see those he had sinned against? In his own account of Jesus' life, the Gospel according to Matthew, he refers to himself candidly – Matthew the tax collector. I once was lost but now am found. I thought that I was outside of God's kingdom but Christ showed me the extent of His grace. The Good Physician is among us. He draws near to a terminally sick race to heal us by His death and resurrection, mercifully pouring out the medicine of His blood, the medicine of forgiveness. The Son of God loves us, died for us and rose again. That's all the reputation we need.