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“Following Sinners”

Matthew 9:9-13

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Introduction:

I suspect if you’ve had many conversations with me over the years, or just listened to my sermons, you know that my father and I had a very special relationship. Even when we were on different wavelengths during my college years, we maintained a very close tie. “Daddy’s girl” would not be too big of a stretch for me to say. I’ve mentioned before that we would have our Sunday afternoon phone calls – even when I was an adult - that always started out like this: Hi, Daddy. *Hi Susie – how was church today? Good. What did you preach about? Sin. You for it or agin’ it? I’m agin’ it, daddy.*

I could see in my mind, mom standing there, shaking her head at the corniness of our little dialogue. Then we would continue our conversation by catching up on things, and seeing how our week had gone.

Truth be told, preachers in our tradition don’t preach about sin all that much. Of course, it sort of floats around the edges of our sermons – and we all know it’s there, but rarely do we hit it straight on. Today’s gospel lesson in Matthew brings it right out there. This is the story of Jesus’ call to Matthew – asking Matthew to get up from his secure and lucrative tax table and join Jesus on a journey of a lifetime – following him, being a disciple. But Matthew was a sinner. And the response to Jesus’ calling a sinner to be a follower, created a great deal of heat for Jesus. Hear now the word of God

[Matthew 9:9-13]

SERMON: *Follow me, Matthew,* said Jesus. And just like that Matthew rose up from the chair behind the desk in his tax office – and followed Jesus. Did he look back; did he secure his post, pack up his possessions, give notice, grab his pen, or even lock the door? We don’t know if he did any of these things. But we can be sure that for the rest of his life, whenever he got the chance, he told and retold the story of the day Jesus walked into his office and called him to come, follow. And he did.

Of all the people Jesus took on that three-year adventure, Matthew seems like the least likely to me. To just up and walk away from his wealthy position, to go on the unknown journey with a country rabbi, why would he do that? A tax collector (the KJV calls him a publican) is a man in public service. When Rome was at the height of Empire-dom, gathering taxes was sub-contracted out – or franchised if you will – to local people. If a person wanted to collect taxes in his city, he bought the right to do so. Matthew owned the Capernaum franchise and needless to say, with Rome being a long way off, there wasn’t a lot of regulation or price control or ceilings in place on this tax stuff. There were *set taxes*:

- 10% of your grain crop went to the government
- 20% of your fruit crop was turned in for tax.
- There was a poll tax for each person, and a
- 1% income tax. Those were pretty much set for everyone – not subject to adjustments.
- It was the tariffs that invited the corruption in that day. Transporting of goods from field to market could be taxed anywhere from 2-12%

There was the bridge crossing tax, the harbor tax, cart tax, beast tax, ship tax, license fee, and a dam tax. Matthew was the guy given permission to gather these taxes on behalf of the hated enemy who had conquered their beloved land. Since the rates were set by him, the amount that went into the collector’s pocket, versus what went into the city government pockets, was quiet erratic. You just never knew how much a tax would be from trip to trip.

Since Jewish belief was strongly monotheistic, they believed in paying tribute only to God. This idea of a tax to benefit the foreign conquer was a constant reminder that Caesar wanted tributes, too. Thus the tax collector was now seen as a man of the “unclean status” and therefore not welcome in worship.

To be fair, we really don't know if Matthew was like other taxmen. Maybe he was a good guy who happened to be in a despised and hated profession. But when Jesus showed up and said, *Matthew follow me*, he stood up and walked out of the office without a glance back. A sinner following Jesus. Within days a group of Pharisees, men of faith, approached some of the other followers of Jesus asking, *Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?* Well, why is eating with sinners a problem?

God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food, by his hand we all are fed, let us thank him for our bread.... That grace, or something like it – began our meals as I was growing up. Why do people say a prayer before they eat? In Matthew's world, every meal was sacred. Every meal began with a blessing in which the food was acknowledged as a gift from a gracious God. That prayer claimed each dinner table as sacred space. So it is into this understanding of sacred space that Jesus brought these sinners to dine. This helps us see the scandal brewing.

Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? they asked the disciples. Why does he violate the sacredness of the dinner table with these assorted and unsavory characters? Why does he dishonor the people of God with the unclean? How can we protect the sacredness of God if they are here, too? Meals are too important to let sinners share them with us (so the thinking must have gone).

Jesus' simple reply echoes through the millennium, *I came to call not the righteous but the sinner*. From Matthew, the taxman collaborator with the establishment, to the disciple Simon the Zealot who would just as soon stick a dagger in a Roman soldier as follow the foreign scum, the people Jesus called to follow him were indeed a most unlikely crew to carry God's message of salvation to the world. And still we follow them ... collaborators ----- murderers and still we are like them

Why does your teacher eat with sinners? *Because those who are well don't need a physician*, Jesus replied. He wasn't taking application from the righteous that day. Do you know I've actually had people tell me they don't come to church because they don't feel they are good enough? I want to say, "Oh, not a problem, just come, you'll feel right at home with us – we're all sinners! Sinners come to this church. Some are still wrapped in blankets in their mother's arms. Some are forced to be here and sit sullenly thinking of all the places they'd rather be.^[Willimon PR 6/99, p.43] Sinners – 83 of them headed off to Virginia this morning at 5:15 a.m. to fix up houses in Appalachia. Sinners come to this church. Newlyweds, middle agers, old timers, sinners who have lied and cheated and stolen. And sinners who never did any of those things and feel good about their goodness. Sinners who come early and stay late, and others who come late and leave early. Sinners who are talented and sinners who are not. And some among us put on black robes (and mics) and dare to do most of the talking. Sinners. Jesus said, *I came to the world for you* – to call sinners to be my disciples. Maybe my dad and I had it wrong. Maybe God loves sinners best of all. Yes, we're agin' sin – but we are sinners.

That's so hard for us to wrap our minds around. We try so hard to be good enough to come to church, to be followers of Jesus, to convince God to accept us, and others to like us. We try so hard to be good people who please God.... and thereby hope God will somehow like us better if we just do better. Then why Matthew? Because Jesus saw in Matthew something he truly wanted in a follower.

Do you know about the man who arrived at the Pearly Gates? He was nervous as he stood waiting for St. Peter – and when he arrived the man tentatively asked, *How do I get in?* Oh, it's not so hard, said St. Peter. We operate on a point system here. You need 100 points to get in. So, tell me, why do you think you deserve to get in? Well, said the man, *I went to church all my life*. Great, said St Peter – one point. Wow, said the man, *only 1 point for 85 years of Sunday school and church? Ok. I served on Stewardship board for 10 years, was on Church Trustees for 15.*

Super, said St. Peter – two points.

The man grimaced and said, *I worked on 6 Habitat Houses.*

Amazing, another point. You're up to three now.

I took old people to doctor's appointments. I never swore at my kids, I was faithful to my wife all 65 years of marriage.

Excellent, said St. Peter – 4 points.

Good grief, said the man. I worked at Open M, never cheated on my taxes, took youth on mission trips, was a good neighbor and a hard worker in my business. I hired guys who needed a second chance and was respected by my employees.

Super, now you're up to 5 points.

Oh, for Pete's sake, the man exploded. At this rate I'll only get into heaven by the grace of God!

Perfect, said St Peter, come right on in.

You see, it's about grace. God's grace. We are sinners in need of grace – the savior came to call us to follow and receive this grace. It's a gift from God! Grace means that we can never be good enough to be disciples of Christ's, grace means never getting enough points to qualify for worthiness, grace means we know we can't do it without God. And then accepting the gift placed before us. Grace is God's unmerited gift to us sinners. Not by our goodness, but by God's goodness are we asked to follow and sit at table with others – just like ourselves. All sinners. Of course at this point, you're asking, then why do we bother doing all our good works and church going, and charity, and being just really nice people? Precisely because we want God to know how thankful we are that we can't earn his love – it just is there for us, as we are, sinners, in need of a merciful and gracious God. That's why we do good things – to say thank you God.

Does it seem strange, that in our world where everybody strives to be somebody, that the way to truly find God is to acknowledge that we are nobody and therefore we become an ideal candidate for God to give us everything – to come before God in worship and acknowledge him Lord of our life, savior of us all? *Why does your teacher eat with sinners and tax collector?* they asked. And Jesus answered, *the well have no need of a physician, go and learn what this means. For I have come to call not the righteous – but the sinners.*
Amen