

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 11, 2023 – 2ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/PROPER 5, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: "Following Jesus at all Cost"

Old Testament	Hosea 5:15—6:6	(Return to the Lord; He desires love, not sacrifices)
Psalter	Psalms 50:7-15	(The Lord prefers thanksgiving to burnt offerings)
Epistle Lesson	Romans 4:13-25	(God's promise to Abraham is for all believers)
Gospel	St. Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26	(Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector)

Have you ever wondered, why did Matthew get up? I don't mean, why did he get up in the morning and go to work. Why did Matthew get up and follow Jesus?



I don't know if you're familiar with a famous painting by the Renaissance artist Caravaggio, titled "The Calling of St. Matthew," but it has given me some insight into Matthew's feelings on that day.¹ On the left side of the painting, Matthew sits at a table, counting coins that he has earned from his work as a tax collector. He is dressed in fine clothes, surrounded by four assistants. In the shadows on the right side of the painting is Jesus. He's pointing to Matthew, calling him to follow and His feet are already turned to head out the door. Jesus will not wait.

Matthew has no time to ponder his options. With a coin still in his hand, he looks surprised, and he gestures as if to say, "Who, me?" In the next moment, the tax collector must have tossed that coin, risen from the table, and followed Jesus.

Just as the Internal Revenue Service is not exactly beloved by citizens today, in Jesus' time tax collectors were not respectable members of the community. Their neighbors considered them to be traitors because the Roman occupation of Palestine set the amount for how much money was to be received, but tax collectors were free to demand as much money as they could and pocket the difference. As a result, many were fairly well-off, even if they were not respected or accepted. Moreover, a tax collector would not have been welcome to worship at the Temple; was not invited to anyone's wedding or other celebration; and wouldn't have expected a rabbi like Jesus to speak to him.

Yet, here was Jesus, clearly addressing only Matthew—no one else. A righteous and honorable man was inviting this "traitor" to come and learn from Him, dine with Him, and become one of His inner circle of friends. What a shock that must have been for those in the counting house. The assistants who worked with Matthew and those bringing their taxes would all have been stunned. The disciples following Jesus likely were surprised, too. Certainly, Matthew was taken aback.

But not Jesus. I picture Him with a little smile on His face and a twinkle in His eye at the commotion He has just caused. And, I figure Jesus walked away with great joy in His heart when Matthew suddenly trusted Him enough to follow—and in doing so, would leave behind his work, along with all his wealth and ill-gotten comfort.

The Jewish religious leaders are surprised, too. Notice, they don't even want to talk to Jesus about this directly. They draw near to His followers, and ask the disciples to answer for the actions of their teacher. But Jesus replies to the Pharisees directly. Here's how the passage (Matthew 9:10-13) reads in a contemporary translation of the Bible, *The Message*:

“Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew’s house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus’ followers. ‘What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riff-raff?’ Jesus, overhearing, shot back. ‘Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”

Whew! Jesus doesn’t mince words. He speaks plainly, even when His words might sting. Christ came to invite outsiders—those who don’t know or follow Him. This talk of outsiders and insiders may be difficult for us to hear. When I was growing up as a Greek-American in the South, because I didn’t look like any of my blonde classmates and was an egg-head, I was often considered an outsider; I didn’t fit in. But when I got to college there were other intellectuals, and students from all over the country and the world. I found myself becoming an insider amongst other oddballs. Perhaps you, too, can remember occasions when you felt like an insider, and other times when you felt like an outsider.

Each one of us is a bit of both. One of the great Martin Luther’s pithy insights was that we are all “simultaneously saint and sinner.” That’s why Jesus is speaking these words to every one of us. When we feel like insiders, Jesus reminds us that God’s desire is for us to be merciful toward others, reaching out to those who may feel like outsiders, to honor them and care for them, inviting them to sit at our table, and to belong to Jesus’ group (the Church)—no matter what others might think.

If we want to sit with Jesus, then we, too, must share our meals with the outsiders. The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and prolific author, suggests a list of outsiders who might be at Jesus’ table today: a child molester; an arms dealer; a garbage collector; a man with AIDs; a teenage crack addict; a transgender person; and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers. “The heartbreaker is Jesus,” Brown Taylor observes, “sitting there as if everything is just fine.”² And it is fine. Because Jesus is there, and He loves every one of them unconditionally.

Let’s think for a minute: Who might be at our table here in Compass? A woman struggling with mental illness, or a racist with a police record; a man whom the Amish have shunned, or a despairing farmer on the verge of bankruptcy; a teenaged girl covered with tattoos and piercings, or a drunk wandering along the highway?

Actually, it would be *whomever* you’d be uncomfortable inviting to dinner in your home. If that’s whom Jesus would invite, His list might be enough to make us feel like outsiders. If so, Jesus has turned the tables on us once again. But that really is the good news—whether we consider ourselves insiders or outsiders, Jesus sees *every one of us* as outsiders. In other words, we all need Jesus and are all called to follow Him.

When we come to the Eucharist, Jesus honors us by sharing His meal with us. As we muddle through life, Jesus walks with us, showering us with His compassion and mercy whenever we encounter troubles and difficulties in our lives. He reminds us that the rituals of our faith—“the sacrifices,” according to this text—aren’t as important to God as whether we treat others with mercy and lovingkindness.

It’s not a bad thing to feel like an outsider when we are in the presence of Jesus. For when we do, we will hear Jesus say, “Come—follow me.” And, like Matthew, what choice do we truly have?

As Peter once said to Jesus, “Lord, to whom *would* we go? *You* have the words of life” (John 6:68 BSB). *Amen!*

¹ Adapt. Evelyn Weston, “Inside Out,” 21 September 2003, [SermonCentral.com](https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/inside-out-evelyn-weston-sermon-on-discipleship-62164) <<https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/inside-out-evelyn-weston-sermon-on-discipleship-62164>> 5 June 2023. Used with permission.

² *Ibid.*