

“Matthew and the Church”

Matthew 9:9-13; Ephesians 4:1-16

Sermon for the Commemoration of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist; September 19, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the church year, the commemoration of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, falls on September 21. Since the 21st is only two days away, I thought we would observe the commemoration of St. Matthew today. It gives us an opportunity to talk about the church in some important ways.

Apparently, there was a tax booth near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, as Mark’s Gospel tells us (Mark 2:13). There was a man sitting at the tax booth collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. He was a tax collector, or tax farmer, as many scholars call it (Matthew 9:9).

What does Jesus do? Does He walk on by, pretending like Matthew doesn’t exist? Does He walk by sneering at Matthew, giving him dirty looks? Does He engage in a tirade against Matthew, how he represents the power of the oppressor? No. He calls to him, “Follow me” (Matthew 9:9).

In the power of the call from Jesus, Matthew stood up and followed Him. There is power in Jesus’s call because He has the power of the kingdom. There is power in Jesus’s call that is the power of grace. It draws Matthew out of the chair at the tax booth to follow Jesus.

Jesus’s call is grace if we consider this. Tax collectors were largely not liked by the people. The Pharisees numbered them with the “sinners” (Matthew 9:11). There was undoubtedly a crowd gathered around Jesus when He called Matthew. The grace is that Jesus stopped at the booth and called Him.

From Matthew’s perspective, it was probably something like this. He is just sitting there doing his tax-collecting thing. Suddenly there is a man standing there. Matthew recognizes Him as Jesus. Then the man says something to Matthew. Is it condemnation? Is it ridicule? No.

The realization dawns on Matthew. He is calling me to follow Him. He wants me. He *wants me. He wants me.* So Matthew followed.

This is the first thing about the church we can see. Being part of the church is a call by Christ. It is a call of grace; a call that no matter who you are, what your background, what your past, Jesus wants you. He wants *you*. How could He want me, says the tax collector and sinner. Yet, Jesus calls, “follow me,” and in His call, there is the fact that He wants *you*. This is grace.

Another interesting thing about the call of Matthew is the fact that he was a tax collector. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He saw Simon Peter, Andrew his brother, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee engaged in their trade. They were fishermen.

This is interesting in relation to Matthew. One can wonder what kind of interaction the four fishermen had as businessmen with the tax collector. One wonders how they, being Jewish men, felt about Matthew, a fellow Jew, but one who, as a tax collector, in one way or another could have represented to them the oppressive power of Rome. Did they think that Matthew was doing what many of the tax collectors probably did?; collect more taxes than they really should have. Did they see Matthew as friend or foe in the social, political, and economic situation?

And here they see Jesus, stopping by the tax booth. “What is He doing that for,” they might have thought to themselves. Then they hear Jesus call Matthew, just as He had called them. “Follow me.”

This teaches us that Jesus' call to follow transcends politics and economics and social standing. Jesus' call treats everyone the same. It views everyone in the same way. All are in need of a physician, with respect to the kingdom of God. It is Jesus's call that determines in or out of the kingdom of God, because it is Jesus Himself that determines that. Of course, a person can reject Christ's call. A person can say, "That's okay Jesus, I will just go on the way I am, thank you. Politics, economics, social standing, and determining what is right for myself are my absolute truth."

This is what many of the Scribes and Pharisees did in response to Jesus. It may have also turned out in the end that many tax collectors and sinners did the same. But at least at this stage, the tax collectors and sinners were rejoicing in Jesus's grace toward them that He should call them to follow; that He should be interested in them; that He should give them a chance; that He should be the one who forgives their sin and leads them in grace and truth, in what is right, and in genuine love.

In the calling of Matthew, we see that Jesus calls together many different people from many different backgrounds into the one faith, into following the one Lord, as taught by the Apostles. Jesus calls us into fellowship with one another in the one faith one Lord, as taught by the apostles.

There is one last thing I want to say about how the call of Matthew tells us important things about the church. This has to do with how Matthew was called to do something else important. It was to write a Gospel about Jesus.

Now it is obvious that the Gospel of Matthew does not have Matthew's name in the text. None of the Gospels do that, actually. It could be that when it comes to the presentation of Jesus in His deeds and His words, it would not have been appropriate to attach a name to the testimony because that testimony does not belong to any one person. It belongs to Jesus first and then to all Christians of all time, that is, the church.

Nevertheless, there is tradition that reaches all the way back to the beginning of the second century, the early 100's. This tradition says that Matthew wrote the Gospel we know as the Gospel according to Matthew. The arguments of the historical critics in the modern age do not clearly overcome that tradition. So I, for my part, will stick with it.

But here is the interesting thing. Among Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is only Matthew's Gospel that makes express and direct reference to the church. One of those direct references comes just after Peter's great confession of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). In response to that, Jesus said, "You are Peter, and on this rock, the rock or truth of Peter's confession, I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against her" (Matthew 16:18).

Matthew conveys to us Jesus's teaching that He builds the church on the truth of what Peter confessed about Jesus. And Matthew conveys to us Christ's promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, against us Christians, as we hold fast to the faith and confession of who Jesus is and what He has done.

Why will the gates of hell not prevail? Because Jesus has died and He has risen. He is living with the Spirit in our faith in Him and present with the Spirit in our confession of Him. And He is with us here in our midst through word and Sacrament. The devil is defeated. He has no power of accusation against those who follow Jesus, because Jesus has taken away that power in atoning sacrifice. And not even death itself can defeat Jesus, for He has risen from the dead. Jesus Himself is the rock, known and followed in His teaching given through the Apostles. And

no human power, no demonic power, no condemnation can prevail against Him and His teaching.

So we give thanks for Matthew today, Christian, Apostle, and writer of a Gospel. We give thanks for how Christ calls us to follow through Matthew. We give thanks for how the call of Matthew shows us God's grace as Jesus calls us to follow. We give thanks that Matthew teaches us to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that in Jesus not even the gates of hell can prevail against us. Amen.