

Answering the Call

In our first Scripture passage, which Joetta read for us this morning, we heard the call story of Abram, who we better know as Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people. In that passage, God calls Abram to leave Harran, a town his father had moved to, along the modern day Turkish-Syrian border. Despite being old, Abram was 75, he heard God's call, and obeyed – even though Abram didn't have much of an idea of who God is, or what He was calling Abram to do. The rest, as they say, is history. God is faithful. He keeps His word.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be looking at the call God lays on our lives. Each of us are called. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." That's something in which each of us – as followers of Christ – should be actively involved. It's not just the pastor's job. It's an "all people" kind of job. I want to look at another call story this morning, and look at some of the people mentioned in the broader story, in Matthew's gospel. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26. **Read Matt. 9:9-13; 18-26.**

Matthew the Tax Collector

Each of the main characters that interact with Jesus in our gospel passage today go through a significant transformation that rewrites their future. They share the fact that they are all in need, whether they know it, or not. And, they all seem to act with a simple faith that who Jesus is and what He says, is true and powerful, even if they can't see the long-term outcome. In following and pursuing Jesus, they begin to trust the unknown. We start with the tax collector, Matthew.

He records, "As Jesus went on from there [Jesus was in His hometown and had just healed a paralyzed man], He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth," (Matt. 9:9a). What does Jesus say to Matthew? "Follow Me," He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him," (verse 9b). Matthew, of course, wrote this gospel, and his call story is completely contained in this single verse.

A disciple is a follower. That means there's someone to follow, and that someone wants followers. When you look at the words Jesus spoke in the gospels, He says, "Follow Me," more often than He says, "Believe in Me." As followers of Jesus Christ, we should have an assurance that He's called us, and expects us to draw closer to Himself. The life of faith is one which is a constant wrestling with His call to us to follow Him, and our own personal desires to do things our own way. Following Christ isn't a once and done, quick easy fix – it's hard work. It means daily involvement and pursuit of the One we follow.

Matthew the Disciple

I want you to look at a picture (at <https://thevcs.org/x/calling-matthew/portrait-matthew-evangelist-6041>) and we'll zoom in, if we can, to notice a couple of the details. This is out of a prayer book from the Middle Ages, and is a cover illustration for

Matthew's gospel. The bottom section of the picture features Matthew, doing what tax collectors do. See that? He's sitting at his table, counting and sorting out his silver and gold coins. He would have had a pretty good life, like another tax collector we've heard of before, who climbed a tree to see Jesus. Remember that guy? What was his name? Zacchaeus. Another tax collector. Jesus comes up to Matthew's tax booth, you see that, and Matthew looks up to see Him.

The top part of the picture, is the outcome, of Matthew's willingness to follow Christ. We see him there with a scroll and quill, with an angel holding an inkwell, while Matthew's writing the gospel. Following Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to take up residence inside us changes us. Do you think in the moment that Matthew first saw Jesus, he realized he was in need? He's a tax collector – and from other accounts, we know that tax collectors were marginalized – they robbed their own people to get rich and pay off Rome, after all. Matthew, like all of us, was in need when he met Jesus Christ. And, it's obvious that Matthew has been changed, because he apparently invites Jesus to his house for dinner. We're told, "while Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with Him and His disciples," (verse 10).

The guests at Matthew's table aren't the type of folks with which most religious people would associate. Notice what the religious folks said. "When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" (verse 11). When we let Jesus be King of us, when we really follow Him, we'll probably have to step out of our comfort zones. He expects us to associate with folks we aren't comfortable being around. He expects us to spend time lovingly guiding and inviting other marginalized misfits into deeper relationships with Him. These are people unlike us. They may have a different skin tone, a different view on God, how to live, and they may not line up with what we think followers of Jesus should look like. That's okay – our job is to love them, and through deepening relationships with them, to come to a point when we can speak Biblical truth into their life.

Critics Will Criticize

We'll also have folks around us who won't believe that we're letting Him change us. They may speak ill of us, or think less of us. There may also be people, who have been involved in the Church for years, who have allowed their hearts to become calloused, who won't believe God would use such a messed up person. Do I daresay, messed up, like us? We're messed up, friends. I'm messed up – you're messed up. Anyone who says they aren't is lying to you! I experienced that first-hand as a young adult, being told that God couldn't use "a sinner," like me. Guess what? He does – if we're willing to let Him sit on the throne.

I suspect that we have many brothers and sisters beyond the walls of New Hope who have also experienced that, or are experiencing that, in this moment in the life of our denomination. Look how Jesus responds to the judgmental religion-lovers who were critiquing what He was doing. See, these Pharisees weren't focused on building relationships with God and others, they were focused on following the rules. On being right. On doing everything the right way. So, as He often does in Scriptures, Jesus sets

them straight. “On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (verses 12-13).

Desiring mercy and not sacrifice is a phrase that comes from Hosea. Hosea 6:6 says, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” Some of you have been involved in band before. Before a concert, the band gets together to warm up, and part of that warming up is the process of “tuning” their instruments. Usually they use middle C on a piano to tune their instruments. As followers of Jesus Christ, our hearts should be “tuned” to God’s own heart. The mistreatment of others, which we know breaks His heart, should likewise cause us grief.

The Synagogue Leader

By calling God’s people to mercy, sinners are led to a new life of obedience that produces God’s peace in the world – which is good for the whole community. Matthew’s storytelling style isn’t always clear, so when we reach verse 18, we aren’t sure if we’re still at his dinner table, or if we’re somewhere else. Pay attention to what happens. “While He was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before Him and said, ‘My daughter has just died. But come and put Your hand on her, and she will live,’” (Matt. 9:18).

What a contrast! The religious leaders have just tried to call Jesus out for associating with the marginalized of society, and then one of them – Luke’s gospel records his name as Jairus – comes along and asks Jesus to raise his dead daughter to life. This is our second person in need. Jairus, the synagogue leader – this would be equivalent to an elder or a licensed local pastor in the United Methodist Church – calls on Jesus to come undo the death of his daughter. “Jesus got up and went with him, and so did His disciples,” (verse 19). Both Jesus and Matthew simply get up and follow the call laid before them. There’s something significant here for us. Jesus is our Leader who is committed to the call that He invites others to – He does not call us to where He Himself has not gone and does not ask us to do what He Himself will not do.

The Unclean Woman

“Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch His cloak, I will be healed,’” (verses 20-21). While Jesus is following the synagogue leader to his dead daughter, another woman in need comes up behind Him. See friends, this woman is another person in need. Unlike Jairus who has the position, authority, and the communal welcome to approach Jesus with boldness, this woman is an unclean person. Since she’s been bleeding for twelve years, she’s not only physically unwell, but religiously dangerous according to the purity laws of the Old Testament. Yet, she has the same kind of faith in Christ’s power as the synagogue leader, and trusts that the littlest of contact with Jesus will be enough to change her future.

“Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ He said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment,” (verse 22). Jesus confirms this poor woman’s belief – her faith in Him, and heals her. It was an act of restoration which

utterly changed every aspect of her existence. Think of it. She had been bleeding for twelve years. Under those Old Testament laws, anyone who came into contact with her was unclean. In those days, they often sent people like her to the edge of towns, and hoped they'd make it. She would have been there with people with other diseases. Her family wouldn't have been able to see her on a daily basis. She couldn't go back home.

We experienced a little taste of this during the pandemic. Everyone was cooped up during the lockdown. You weren't supposed to go see people, for fear of spreading the virus. So this lady, for the most part, she's on her own, at the edge of town. But because of her faith, Jesus does for her what doctors couldn't do over the previous twelve years. She can finally go home. She can see her family again. She can become a full member of society again.

A Daughter Called from Death to Life

“When Jesus entered the synagogue leader's house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, He said, ‘Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.’ But they laughed at Him,” (verses 23-24). See, while Jairus has gone to find Jesus and bring Him back to his house to do the seemingly impossible, everyone else has already started the visitation and funeral service. They know the girl's dead. That's part of their custom. They've got funeral music playing. People are wailing and crying. It's a similar scene to the one we see in the gospels when Lazarus dies, and Jesus calls him back from the dead.

Jesus tells the people they should go home. In essence, He tells them that what they see with their own eyes isn't true reality. She isn't dead, she's sleeping – and He starts ushering in the true reality He has promised to those who laughed at His words. “After the crowd had been put outside, He went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region,” (verses 25-26). Just as the synagogue leader believed it could be, Jesus touches the young girl's dead body and brings her back to life. This young girl, desperately in need of the life-giving touch of Jesus, like the bleeding woman, has the rest of her life restored and opened to possibilities – a story yet to be told.

In these short verses, we see a vocational 180°, a restoration, and a resurrection. We have various kinds of people shown mercy by Jesus Christ: a despised sinner, an unclean woman, a dead child, a respectable religious leader. Each of them were sick or sinners in different ways, healed by Jesus. Each story involves simple faith and action that results in new possibilities for life, wholeness, and purpose. Each story requires the person involved to take a leap of faith, to trust in the unknown, and believe that God was, and is, present. Because of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, everything changed for them. May it be so for us as well. Amen.

Prayer: God who Calls us Your own People, You promise us long journeys and new names. Call us out to risk holy adventure with unusual table companions. Linger with us so that we may be faithful disciples, touching the fringe of Your healing on behalf of all Your children. Amen.