

Called

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

INTRODUCTION

In a small group Bible study I attended a few weeks ago, the leader began our session by asking each of us to name three words that described us at that particular moment in time. Three words. Not a three-word phrase. But three separate, distinct words.

If you were asked the same question, what might your three words be?

With this sermon, I begin a summer long series looking words that describe God's intention for our lives together here at Grace. That is, what words do (or should) describe us as His Church? Eventually I will share 10 of those words, one each week, each one drawn from one of the assigned Scripture readings for the day.

Today our word is:

Called

And that word is illustrated by the story of a man named Matthew. The same Matthew, as it turns out, as the author of the story. Matthew the Gospel writer tells us HIS story – the story of how he was called by Jesus.

- His story is a story for all of us, for, like Matthew, each one of us has been called.

When we first meet Matthew, he is a tax collector. To us, the term “tax collector” evokes images of IRS agents hovered over reams of tax forms with computers and calculators. But the tax collectors of Jesus' time had more in common with the mafia than accountants. They were thugs and shylocks who preyed upon their own people on behalf of a foreign occupying government.

- Fully empowered by the might of the world's most powerful military force, they pillaged and ransacked their fellow countrymen.
- They were traitors of the worst kind.

The wildly popular television series *The Chosen* portrays Matthew, not as an instrument of evil, but rather as a sympathetic figure who is drawn into the trade as a result of a neurological disorder. Brilliantly played by Paras Patel, the character's evident autism serves to diminish his culpability. This creative choice renders him more palatable to a modern audience. It also makes his social acceptance within the group of apostles more believable.

- But it is doubtful the real Matthew suffered from a disability that would excuse his depravity. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for him to have served as a tax collector in Jesus' day if that were true.

For instance, it was common for tax collectors to:

- inflate the value of property and income in order to charge more tax, from which they'd skim off the top,
- give predatory loans and enforce collection with violence,

- shake people down on the street at a moment's notice, sometimes twice a day.

Despite how *The Chosen* portrays him, the real Matthew was likely a terrifying figure, so much so that he was ...

Matthew was unredeemable in the minds of most religious people of the day.

That is what makes the call of Matthew so marvelous! Not even Matthew expected it!

There is a famous piece of art by a Baroque painter named Caravaggio's and titled "The Call of St. Matthew." In it Matthew is seen hunched over a table with other well-to-do figures, clothed in finery and counting coins. Jesus stands in the doorway, his hand outstretched toward Matthew. In response, Matthew points to his own chest as if to ask, "Who? Me?"

"Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. (Matthew 9:9)

To use our word of the day, Matthew was called.

The calling of Matthew conveys several key lessons and applications for us today.

LESSON #1: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE GOOD TO BE CALLED

Praise God for that one, huh? If the standard for being called is being good, no one would be called. Romans 3:10 makes that clear:

No one is good—no one in all the world is innocent. (Romans 3:10, LB)

In fact – now listen carefully – because this is one of the most bizarre Biblical teachings you will ever hear:

In order to be called by Jesus, you have to be bad – and you have to know it.

Later in our text, Matthew throws a dinner party and invites all his tax collector (thug) buddies to the meal. The bad people were on the inside eating, and Jesus was in there eating with them. The good people were on the outside looking in and they were doing the "tsk-ing" thing that good people sometimes do. "Tsk, tsk, tsk – look at Jesus eating with those kind of people."

Our text tells us:

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13)

He came to call the bad! Nowhere in this passage does Jesus call the "tsk-ers." His call only goes to taxers.

Martin Luther ran into a lot of tsk-ers in his day, so he coined a phrase that we Lutherans ought to know:

"simul justus et peccator" (Martin Luther)

It means "simultaneously saint and sinner."

In Christian theology, particularly Lutheran thought, we believers are considered to be simultaneously saints and sinners—justified by Christ yet still subject to sin.

- In other words, our faith makes us righteous from the perspective of God (so we are good) but we continue to wrestle with sinful desires and actions (so we believe we are bad – and we believe that other people are bad too).

If we forget both of those are true, we get into trouble.

- If we forget that our faith makes us good in the sight of God, we act like those other tax collectors at Matthew's party – never seeing ourselves as worthy enough to be called, and so we continue doing what we have always done.
- If we forget that we also sinners – and that sinners daily wrestle with sin – we act like those tsk-ers who think they are perfect and look down on those who are clearly not perfect.
 - Or to use the words of the text, we become like those healthy people who don't think they need a doctor.

LESSON #2: THE CALL IS TO "FOLLOW"

Whenever Jesus called someone, He called them to "follow."

- It was true of Matthew
- It was true of Peter, Andrew, James and John.
- It is true for you and me:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

Being called by God is a thing we all share in common. And it is always first and foremost a call to "follow." Where are you following? Wherever He leads?

- In those first few days, God never lays out the complete and total path. He just says that we are to follow.
- We don't necessarily know where following will lead. We just ... follow.

The first step is always a call to a relationship with me. Follow ME, He says. It is a relationship that cultivated through prayer, reading of Scripture and the engagement with a local congregation. Following always involves those three things.

When we are faithful to the call, He can call us to more specific areas. For me following led to:

- A career in pastoral ministry
- A cute brunette cheerleader named Karen Bryant

- And eventually to Springfield OH.
- And much, much more

When I started to follow, I didn't know about any of that stuff. I just started to follow.

The Church is the collection of those people who have been "called" – that's what the Greek word means. There was no word for "church" before Jesus – so He had to invent one. And the word He invented was

ekklesia (the called ones)

So when we gather together, we faithfully following what Jesus has called us to be.

#3: YOU NEED TO SAY "YES"

Karen and I are at the phase of our lives where our nieces and nephews have almost all graduated from high school. Now we are in the wedding phase.

- We were at the wedding of our niece in November. That niece's sister gets married this month and her brother will be married next month.
- Another nephew just proposed so there is another wedding the middle of next year.
- Weddings mean invitations, and invitations come with a special request:

RSVP

répondez s'il vous plaît

When I am talking with a soon-to-be bride and groom, I tell them they are likely getting "yes" responses from about half of those they invite.

- Unfortunately, Jesus doesn't get that percentage.

In another New Testament text, Jesus calls three other people and they all decline.

- One needed to go to a funeral
- One wanted to go home for a bit
- One didn't like the idea of sleeping outdoors

We don't know how many tax collectors came to Matthew's dinner, but Matthew seems to have been the only one to follow.

In the 22nd chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of a great wedding. The king threw the wedding for his son, and no showed up. The parable ends with this famous line:

Many are called but only a few come. (Matthew 22:14, MSG)

Their reasons are varied, but ultimately they all come down to one reason: "God expects from me than I am willing to give."

- How sad that is!

APPLICATION

We are the church! The called people of God, willing to follow Him wherever He leads.

What all does that mean? I don't know. None of us do. But we follow.

Where He leads us, we will follow.

Why? Because we have been called to do so. We are the church.

Amen