

Pentecost 2 – June 11, 2023
Text: Matt 9:9-13
Theme: Follow Me...Now!

Matthew is one of my favorite people in the Bible because he is such a good model for people in this time and place. Matthew is a successful person. He is a Jew who has found a way to become fabulously wealthy in Roman employment. Business moguls of our day would applaud Matthew! He's a genius using the invading government to make money. Of course, the money he makes is at the expense of the Jews but hey, sacrifices have to be made to get ahead in this world, right?

Yet, apparently Matthew was not happy being a rich traitor to his people. The sacrifices he had made had made him sick. There are a great many sick people in the world, people who look as though they ought to be happy with success and money and good looks. Then you hear that they committed suicide and everyone wonders why on earth they would do something like that when everything was so great for them. You can never see inside another person to know how sick they really are. That's why suicide is so often shocking to us. We had no idea how sick they were.

That is the very person for whom Jesus came. He came to heal all of our spiritual illnesses that drive us to lead unfulfilling, unhappy, unfaithful lives. Without Jesus, a person is not complete, cannot be complete. I know that sentiment does not play well in this society. In

this society, we are supposed to pretend that all religious people are equal. We call them people of faith and never mind who or what their faith is in. How can I say that my Muslim neighbor or my Jewish neighbor is not complete? Who am I to judge such a person in such a matter? I'm no one and I do not say it. But, Jesus does. He says,

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That means that Jesus is the only one who can heal our spiritual sicknesses. Jesus is the only one who can make us whole: not Allah, not Buddha, not money, not food, not another person. Jesus called Matthew who was an important, successful person who knew that he was empty inside because, when Jesus called, he left everything he had and followed Jesus. Jesus came to call the spiritually sick and when Jesus calls the sick, they either follow or they refuse to follow. That is the only power we have over God, to refuse, and there is nothing anyone can do about it because it is our God-given right to go to Hell if we so choose.

Jesus is the Great Physician. He died on the cross to pay for our sins and offers complete healing to everyone. He calls us out of our drab, pitiful lives and offers us immortality. The only hitch is, it's all received by faith. If you want concrete proof of immortality and complete healing, you're out of luck. The other hitch is that it is offered to everybody, even "those people." You know, the people who you don't think deserve it because they have led such disreputable lives while you have at least

maintained appearances! "Those people" will probably be different people for everybody. I suspect we all have personal criteria as to what makes them, "those people." But, nevertheless, Jesus calls them just as loudly as he called you and not only that, Jesus uses you to call them.

I don't know if you have experienced this or not but I keep finding my group of "those people" in my path. I suspect that Jesus intentionally put them in my path so that I will have to deal with my own personal sicknesses. See, part of our sickness is believing that we in any way deserve what we have. Oh, I hear people mouth platitudes about how it's all God and not them but try and suggest that they sacrifice what they have for the proclamation of the Gospel and you will often see a different attitude. Suddenly it's all theirs! They earned it with hard work and sacrifice and they deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labors! I think Jesus works to knock that illness out of us by continually pushing our boundaries until we give up and stop trying to keep a foot in both worlds. We cannot be a tax collector in this world and a saint in the next. It will ultimately be "all in" one way or the other.

It reminds me of a joke that clarifies the ridiculousness of trying to hold on to the things of this world. Many of you have heard me tell this before but a rich guy dies and he has been a very faithful Christian. He asks God for a small favor just before he dies. Since he had worked so hard for his fortune and had been so faithful to God in returning a faithful offering, would God allow him to bring a little of his fortune with

him into heaven? God said yes, he could bring one trunk full of whatever he liked. The wealthy man, being pretty sharp, converted his cash to gold bars and packed a few hundred pounds into the trunk. As he dragged his gold-laden trunk through the pearly gates, St. Peter stopped him and asked for a peak at what he had brought since no one had ever before been allowed to bring anything into heaven with them. The man proudly opened the trunk displaying nearly 10 million dollars' worth of gold bars. St. Peter looked at it, looked at him, scratched his head and asked, "You could bring anything you wanted, right?" "Yes," said the wealthy man proudly. St. Peter looked at the contents of the trunk again and then back at the man, and then to the streets of heaven all around them, and asked, "You could bring anything you wanted and you brought a trunk full of pavement?"

That is how ridiculous it is for us when we think that we will follow Jesus just as soon as we finish accomplishing some worldly goal. I will take my faith seriously and follow Jesus just as soon as I get that job I dream of, or the degree I am pursuing, or finish having all the "fun" I want to have. I'll follow Jesus...eventually. As soon as I have time, then I'll follow Jesus. Then I'll take time to feed my faith. Except, if faith withers and dies of starvation before you find time to feed it, what then? Jesus is right here right now. He is calling. Either get up from the tax booth of your life and follow him or not but you can't follow him if you're firmly seated in your tax booth.