

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Pew Bible, N.T. pg. 8-9

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when Jesus heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners"... ¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly, a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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"Friends in Low Places"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Thirty-six years ago, Garth Brooks released a single that few expected would have the staying power and resilience to make number 1 on the country music charts, let alone remain popular thirty-six years later at wedding receptions and line dance parties. It's an earworm, to be sure, but I bet most of you know it:

*Yes, I've got friends in low places,
Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases
My blues away, and I'll be okay.
Yeah, I'm not big on social graces;
Think I'll slip on down to the oasis.
Oh, I've got friends in low places!*

Well, with all due respect to Mr. Brooks, that could have been Jesus' theme song, too. Not that he did shots of whiskey or beer chasers, but he definitely had friends in low places. We see it today as he walks along through town and sees Matthew hanging out in his tax-collecting station. Tax-collectors were, after all, the lowest of the low. The Mishnah and the Talmud (specifically in Tractate Sanhedrin 24b), interpret Hebrew Law to add clarity, and based on prohibitions from Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 19, they lay out four classes of people who were completely unreliable and untrustworthy, and therefore, could never testify in court. They were: gamblers, loan sharks, thieves, and extortionists. Tax-collectors were extortionists. They bid for the right to collect taxes in a certain quadrant of the city,

and the one who won the bid was protected by Roman law and Roman soldiers. There was no recourse – as long as the tax-collector paid his bid to Rome, Rome let him collect whatever he could, over and above his bid. That was the perk. So a Jewish Man serving as a tax-collector worked with the oppressive government that had defeated his own people in order to extort his neighbors and countrymen for money. There was no position more rank or vile to an ancient Jew. Why do it? Because one got rich – filthy rich – and made friends with the wealthy and powerful in town.

There are some folks, both back then and now, who are perfectly content to extort others, and make money on the backs of the poor and suffering with little thought or care beyond their own greed. But then there are some who come to regret those choices, come to see that hollowness of wealth and feel the weight of separation from one's roots. Scripture doesn't say it in so many words, but Matthew, I think, fit the latter category.

The call story itself is one of the strangest. Jesus passes Matthew's booth, calls him to follow, and Matthew gets up and goes. That's all the information we get. Did they have a prior relationship? Given that Jesus seems to regularly eat and drink with tax-collectors, that's possible. But we're not given the backstory. The point here is that Jesus calls us. We're never ready. We're never fully qualified. And we're rarely free of other responsibilities. Matthew is at work, for heaven's sake. He's not what anyone would call qualified or prepared. We can speculate about what might be going on within him, but in the end, we know only that he responded.

There is an interesting story about the Queen Mary, one of the most luxurious ocean liners in the world back in the 1930s and '40s. The tables of this great liner bore the finest china and silver. Its private berths were spacious and well-decorated. But during World War II, the Queen Mary was commissioned to serve as a troop transport ship. All of its luxuries were stripped away to prepare it for war. The fine china was replaced by dented metal dinner trays. The spacious compartments were crammed to the ceiling with bunk beds. Today, the Queen Mary serves as a floating museum. One half of the ship is decorated to look exactly like a luxury liner of the 1930s. The other half of the ships is decorated to look like a World War II troop ship. Visitors to the ship confront the radical difference between a life of luxury and a life of service. [from Ralph Winter, "Reconsecration to a Wartime, Not a Peacetime, Lifestyle," in *Perspectives on The World Christian Movement*, ed. R. Winter and S. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 814; as used in "Ready for a Change" by King Duncan, <https://sermons.com>.] Jesus was calling Matthew to a life of service.

What fascinates me about that is that I know who else is following Jesus around. There's a handful of fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John. Philip and Nathaniel are probably at least partly of Greek or Roman origin. Judas Iscariot was probably quite wealthy. And Simon was a zealot, or a political activist working to free Israel. He probably didn't have much nice to say about tax collectors, so I wonder what he thought when Jesus called one to be another of his disciples. It's an eclectic mix that Jesus calls. And he still does.

And when the mainstream folks try to figure out why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus instructs them to learn what it means for God to desire mercy over sacrifice. Lest you're wondering about that, let me remind you that in the end, Matthew sacrifices everything. Why? Because Jesus showed him mercy. Friends, God always starts with mercy. God always starts with a welcome, with accepting people where they are. God always starts with affirmation of our worth and our potential. Friends, and particularly our graduates this morning, follow what Jesus does here: he doesn't lead by highlighting flaws and weakness. He leads by leaning into their strengths. And Jesus isn't afraid of brokenness. We're all broken, every last one of us, somehow, some way. But Jesus, the Great Physician, heals the brokenness. And sometimes those broken places become our greatest strength.

The lectionary then takes to a pair of healing stories – a desperate father and a desperate woman. Mark and Luke tell this story also, but they give our desperate man a name – Jairus – and a position – leader of the synagogue. For them, the leader’s daughter is ill, and time is of the essence, but not here. Here, our desperate father is a leader, presumably in the secular realm, probably a gentile, and his daughter has already died. He says to Jesus, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” That is an audacious request. A psychologist would probably say he’s in denial. His neighbors and loved ones have already sent for the professional mourners. There’s nothing left here to hope for anymore. Everyone knows that. But I guess Dad never got the memo, because he believes with all his heart Jesus will restore her life, so he bows, and he asks the impossible. And Jesus goes with him.

And that’s when we meet our desperate woman, who is hemorrhaging. We don’t know why, but we do know that blood makes her ritually unclean, which in turn, makes it nearly impossible for her to access the ministries of the temple or the synagogue. She interrupts Jesus’ journey to the Leader’s daughter, just as she does in Mark and Luke, but unlike Mark and Luke, who describe Jesus as being surrounded by a crowd when he feels the power go out from him, Matthew makes no note of a crowd or a sense of power leaving him. Rather, he seems privy to the woman’s inner dialogue. She believes the touch will heal, and he confirms her faith, and that is the moment when healing occurs for her.

Her story is a sideline, a tangent, and interruption. Henri Nouwen once pointed out that ministry happens in the interruptions. Matthew is at work when Jesus calls him to follow. Jesus is teaching when the Leader bows to ask for resurrection. And Jesus is on his way there when this woman touches him and is healed. How often do we go home, frustrated, and complain that we didn’t get anything done today. I’ll freely admit that I’ve done that. I have a to-do list, and there are days I don’t check off a single thing. Because the phone and the visits and the emails and the texts and the person at my door, “have you got a minute?” And I confess now that sometimes my answer is “only a minute!” Until I remember that ministry happens in the interruptions.

In my life, I maintain two lists with regularity. One is my to-do list. There’s always more stuff on it than I’d like. I juggle a lot of balls in the air, and sometimes I drop one. When I do, sometimes people get hurt, which is the last thing I want. The other list I maintain is my prayer list. There are always more hurting people on that than I’d like, too. The challenge that lays ever before me is to not become so consumed with the to-do list that I fail to give due time to the prayer list. Perhaps one of the reasons this lesson speaks so powerfully to me is that Jesus didn’t seem to get lost in his to-do list the way I’m prone to do. His prayer life helped him stay centered on who he was rather than what he needed to do. And because he stayed centered on who he was, he never met an interruption – he only encountered people. And he took the time to see who they were. And he was present in the moment.

To the woman, he says, “Take Heart”, which we often take as words of encouragement meant to bolster our strength and our hope. But Vallerie Murray offers good insight when she writes, “Have you ever had a moment when your heart couldn’t take any more? When the weight of grief, stress, or worry left you feeling completely drained—emotionally, mentally, even spiritually? In those moments, a phrase like “*take heart*” might sound nice, but also... impossible. We often think taking heart means “pulling it together,” putting on a brave face, or pretending things aren’t as hard as they feel. But that’s not what Jesus meant when He said, “Take heart” ... Taking heart isn’t about mustering strength at all. It’s about *receiving* it. [from <https://valeriemurray.com/what-it-means-to-take-heart-and-why-it-leads-to-strength-in-god>.] And that’s what happens. She receives healing, strength, acceptance as a daughter among her own people. Matthew takes heart and leaves behind a world of greed and duplicity. He receives strength to start anew. Our leader in this lesson takes heart, holding onto hope despite all the odds. In each of these cases, Jesus doesn’t send healing to save one from the trials of life, but to deal them back

into life – to give them a fighting chance. Jesus has friends in low places, and he lifts them up in hope, offering each one new life.

Billy Strayhorn tells a story about a guy named Lou, who fought in WWII. “In the war years, triage (sorting out) referred to the policy by which medical assistance was given. It was up to the doctors to “color-tag” the wounded, placing them in one of three categories according to their condition. A red tag meant hopeless—nothing we can do will save them. Conversely, a green tag meant they’d make it whether they get help or not. But a yellow color-tag indicated a doubtful prognosis—a chance to live only if medical assistance is given. Since medical supplies were severely limited, assistance was being given mainly to this last group.

“Lou was badly blown apart, including one leg severely wounded. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lou was a hopeless case and tagged him as such, leaving him to die. But a nurse noticed Lou was conscious and began to talk with him. They discovered they were both from Ohio. Getting to know Lou as a person, the nurse just couldn't let him die. She broke all the rules and changed his color-tag to yellow.

“There followed a two-day trip in the back of a truck and months in a hospital. But Lou made it. He met a girl in the hospital who he later married. Even minus one leg, he has led a full happy life, all because a nurse broke the rules of triage and changed a tag. [3 ¶s from Billy D. Strayhorn, Friend of the Hopeless, illustrations on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26, <https://sermons.com>.]

We’re never ready. We’re never fully qualified. And we’re rarely free of other responsibilities. We all broken. But we are all recipients of mercy, and God always starts with mercy. God always starts with a welcome, with accepting people where they are. God always starts with affirmation of our worth and our potential. That’s where God starts. The table is open to all, and that is where God centers us. Maybe the task of the church is going around changing the tags. To be the agents of hope that Follow Jesus’ example, offering real heart to those in despair; offering new life to those on the margins; offering friendship to those in low places. May it be so. Amen.