

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ But when he heard it, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What would you consider the most pivotal or life-changing event of your life? Can you point to one thing in your life, more than any other, that would have had the most impact on you? It may be that you have experienced such a close brush with death that, from that moment on, you really began to live life in its fullness, savouring every moment. Perhaps you consider the day you were married the most pivotal event in your life, or the day your first child was born. Maybe it was the day you graduated from school, or the day you decided on your career choice. Or perhaps it was the day someone near and dear to you died. All of these are surely life-changing events! For good or for bad, these things can change our lives forever.

Our text today tells us of what must surely have been the pivotal event in the life of the man who is known to us as St. Matthew, an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is told by Matthew himself in the simplest of terms. He tells how, as he was at his tax-booth one day, Jesus came and said to him, **“Follow Me”**. And Matthew responds right away. He leaves his well-paying job behind and follows Jesus and the rest, as they say, is history. This life-changing moment leads us to look back at the man who was inspired by God to write the Gospel which does so much to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Saviour. While it seems that Matthew wrote his gospel for Jews, tradition tells us that he preached the gospel in other lands, too. Another tradition says that Matthew was eventually martyred for his testimony of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

The single, greatest event in Matthew’s life was the day that Jesus stopped by his tax-booth and said, **“Follow me.”** From that moment on, Matthew was not concerned about his career or about his income. All that mattered was following Jesus—and sharing the joy of that following with others. And today, as the church remembers St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, and his witness to Christ, we want to learn how we, too, can share the joy of our life in Christ with others, just as Matthew did.

If there is one thing that seems to make people nervous, it is having to talk about their faith. The last thing that Jesus told His disciples before He ascended into heaven was: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8, ESV) We have no problem thinking of Matthew and the other disciples doing this, but it is a different thing when we think of having to do it ourselves. I have shared with bible classes how I felt going on what we called “cold calls” in our evangelism course at the seminary. These were the calls where we simply went down a street, knocking on doors, and sharing our faith with the people who answered. This is perhaps the hardest type of evangelism, and I used to pray fervently as I walked up the sidewalk to the door. But what I prayed was, “please, don’t let anyone be home. Please don’t let anyone be home.” I guess I just didn’t have what Matthew had.

But Matthew’s first efforts as an evangelist did not start with cold calls down the streets of Capernaum. Rather, he started with what he knew best, with the people he knew best. Our text tells us that Matthew held a dinner and invited two very different groups of people. On the one hand, he invited Jesus and His disciples. But he also invited his co-workers and friends. The description that even Matthew gives of this group is not flattering. He says: **as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.** Matthew knew these people well, these tax collectors and sinners. They were people who didn’t fit in, at least not in the eyes of the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. But Matthew didn’t care what the Pharisees thought. Matthew knew that he himself was a sinner. In Jesus, Matthew met the One who is greater than our sin. He met the Messiah, the Saviour, the One who came to take away our sin and its condemnation through His sacrifice for us on the cross. He met the Saviour, who destroys the very power of death and hell as He rises again from the dead. He met the One who gives life to all who believe in Him. Knowing what Jesus had done for

him was a powerful force moving Matthew to share the joy of that Saviour with others.

Oh, if only we would have that same zeal for sinners that Matthew had! If only we would be as eager as Matthew to share the good news of the Saviour with others. And we can do it in the same way, by starting where we are. We don't have to be out knocking on doors, trying to hit people over the head with our Christianity. Rather, we simply share the joy we have in Christ with the people around us, the people we already know. It is the same sort of thing that God tells Ezekiel in the Old Testament lesson today. The Lord said: ***"Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel"*** (Ezekiel 3:4-5, ESV) We have to acknowledge that God doesn't promise that they will listen to Ezekiel—in fact, He reminds Ezekiel just how stubborn and obstinate these people are. They might listen, and they might not. But regardless, the Ezekiel had to start with what he knew best. His witness had to start among his own people.

That is how Matthew started to share the good news of Jesus Christ—with the people he knew best. He didn't think of witnessing or evangelism as a huge and difficult task. It was all just a matter of word of mouth advertising. Advertisers know the power of one person telling another about their product. In fact, they count on it. If you are ordering something online, do you take time to look at the reviews that are posted? I know we can't always be sure that they are genuine, but don't you consider what others say? If you share with a friend how much you like your new van they might consider buying the same vehicle themselves. On the other hand, if you have nothing good to say, they are not likely to consider that vehicle, either.

The same thing is true of our faith. Day after day, God gives us opportunities to be like Matthew, to share with the people around us the blessings we have as a child of God. A friend is going through a difficult time. They are feeling lost and alone. You can tell them simply to keep their chin up, because things will be all right. Or you can tell them how your God helps you through the low times, and how you have hope that sees beyond the troubles of life because God is with you to bless and deliver you. You can promise to pray for them and with them. When people ask you about your church, do you complain that the sermons are too long or that the pews are too hard? Would it not be better to tell them about the wonderful message of salvation that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is being proclaimed here? I once read about a church that offered the members of the congregation lawn signs to announce the birth of a new baby. The sign would say, "It's a Boy, a part of a growing family worshipping at St. Matthew Church". In putting up this sign, the members of that church were just starting where they were, and telling the people around them what their faith meant to them. That is what Matthew did. That is what we can do. Evangelism sounds scary, but it can be the easiest and most natural thing of all, if we just start where we are, talking about our hope in Christ with the people closest to us.

The question is often asked, "where do new church members come from?" You can find many answers to that question. I looked at some well documented surveys, which note that 3% - 8% walk in on their own initiative. Four to 10% came because of the program the church was offering. Ten to 20% were brought in by the pastor. Another 10 - 25% responded to visitation and evangelism. Between 3 and 6% came through the Sunday School. But anywhere from 60-90% of new members came because they were brought by friend or relative. In other words, they came because of the Matthews they knew. They came because someone close to them shared the good news of God's love with them.

That was Matthew's approach to outreach: share what you know with the people you know. It is the technique that works best for us, too. We have something special to share: the message of God's love that leads Him to send His Son, who becomes one with us by taking into Himself our humanity; who takes our place under the law to suffer our punishment as He dies on the cross, but who also rises again to life and gives that life to all who will believe in Him. As people who know what that means for us, may we also be eager to share it with the people around us, that they may share with us in the life we have in Christ. Amen.