

“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:

It has been called ‘the most famous splint infinitive in history. If you look at the title of our text today you may recognize those words. They come from the opening of the original Star Trek series, in which we are told that the mission of the Enterprise is “to seek out new life, and new civilizations; and to boldly go where no one has gone before.”

If one desires to be grammatically correct, you would not say, “to boldly go”. The correct way of saying this is either to say ‘boldly to go’ or ‘to go boldly’. Of course, most of us in the midst of the day to day conversations of our lives don’t worry too much about splitting an infinitive now and then. Some of you may even wonder what a split infinitive is. And who really cares? Besides, that isn’t what really matters this morning. What we do want to think about is the boldness that we see in our text today. It is the boldness of Matthew, who left his career and his security to follow Jesus. It is the boldness of the Lord who does what no self-respecting Pharisee would ever do, in eating with sinners. It is the boldness of recognizing one’s sin, as Matthew did, and then following that Lord of grace and life.

As the Lord called Matthew, so He calls us to follow Him. He calls us to be bold, and to turn from our sin to His wonderful life of forgiveness and grace. He calls us to be bold, and to go where He will lead. He calls us to be bold, and to share with other sinners the one thing that will have any lasting importance or value, namely the gospel message—the life-changing power of the dying and rising Christ, who wants all people to follow Him to eternal life.

In the simplest and most understated way possible, Matthew tells us about what surely must have been the most pivotal experience of his life. While at work at his tax-collector’s booth one day, Jesus comes up and says to Matthew, ***“Follow me”***. You and I, who look back through the whole of salvation history, do not always grasp just how major an event it was when Jesus said those words to Matthew. I am sure that none of the other disciples would have seen this coming. How bold it was of Jesus to talk with Matthew. After all, tax collectors, also known as publicans, were collaborators with the hated Romans, and no self-respecting Israelite would have anything to do with the conquering, pagan Romans. Matthew and his cohorts also were despised and shunned by their countrymen because they were without exception wealthy through dishonesty. Only a percentage of the money that they collected in taxes was actually required by Rome. Anything over and above the assessment was the way in which tax collectors were paid—and they made sure that they paid themselves well.

But our loving Lord has compassion, even for the worst of sinners. He knows that His forgiving love can change sinners into saints. He does not see us as we are, but as we can be by His grace. And so He calls Matthew to leave the life of a sinner behind and to follow Him all the way to eternal life.

Jesus extends that gracious call to Matthew, and Matthew boldly responds to the call of the Lord. We are told Matthew got up from his tax booth to follow Jesus. He immediately tenders his resignation. He gives up his career and the financial security he has enjoyed. But, by the grace of God, Matthew finds more in following Christ than he could ever have in this world. Matthew would agree with St. Paul, who said: ***“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”*** (Philippians 3:7–9, ESV)

Matthew boldly begins this new life by holding a banquet in his home for Jesus. Matthew wants His friends—the only friends he had, who like him were tax collectors and sinners—to know that his life is different now. He wants them to know the peace and joy he has through Jesus Christ. Matthew does not hide his faith: he boldly testifies to it. And Jesus boldly joins with these

sinners, to bring them the power of His forgiveness; to bring to them the life only He can give. Of course, this didn't go over well with the Pharisees. They could never accept the fact that Jesus would do something so disgusting, as to eat with these people who obviously were horrible sinners—at least as far as they were concerned. They themselves would never go into Matthew's house. They probably hung around outside, waiting to confront the disciples, not Jesus, wanting them to explain such a breach of propriety. ***“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*** But it is Jesus who answers them, who boldly confronts them in their self-righteous pride to remind them: ***“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.”***

The Pharisees boldly proclaimed their righteousness, seeing themselves as obedient to the Law and therefore far above Matthew and his friends. If only they would heed and understand the words of Hosea in our Old Testament reading today: ***“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.”*** (Hosea 6:4, ESV) For all their talk of righteousness, they were far from God's truth. They would never admit it, but they were among the very people that the Lord was calling to His grace and the life only He can give.

As we gather together today, we can rejoice that the Lord who came for sinners boldly went the way that led to the cross. In His great love, Jesus knows the needs of Matthew, the needs of the sinners at the banquet, and the great need of all sinners—which means that He knows our need, too. He knows that without His forgiveness and salvation we are doomed to eternal torment in hell. And so He comes to live for us. He comes to die for us. He boldly goes where no one else can go, as He gives His life for us on that cross. He boldly faces the full fury of hell, as He bears the full burden of our sins and the sins of a whole world, that He might deliver us from sin and hell. And then, He triumphs over sin, death and the devil as He rises from the dead, to bring His salvation and life to all who believe in Him.

Like Matthew, we need to boldly go in answer to Jesus' call and leave behind our sinful lives as we follow Him to eternal life. We need to look into the mirror of God's word and recognize that we are sinners. If we do that honestly, we will see that there is nothing in us worthy of God's goodness and love. But, fellow sinners, we can go boldly to the cross and lay our sins on Jesus. We boldly, confidently, take God at His word, and believe as Abraham did. We boldly place our lives into the care of Him ***“who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”*** (Romans 4:25, ESV)

And then, bold in the forgiveness and life we have in Christ, we do what Matthew did: we reach out to others who need to know that forgiveness and life, too. Don't we all have people around us who do not know or trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord? Don't we come into contact with people at work, at school, and in our social activities who are living like Matthew did before Jesus called him? Don't we all know people who are hurting, who are afraid, who are struggling and searching for something to hold on to in their lives? Don't we know people who are in need of the healing cure that Jesus brings to sin-sick souls? It was that great evangelist, St. Paul who said: ***“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”*** (Romans 10:14–15, ESV)

Next weekend our synod will be meeting in convention under the theme, “Together One”: One Lord, one faith, one body. Our Synodical Constitution declares the objectives of Lutheran Church–Canada. We work to conserve and promote the unity of the true faith. But we exist to “Strengthen congregations and their members in giving bold witness by word and deed to the love and work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and extend that Gospel witness into all the world.”

We are united in the true faith of Scripture so that we may boldly go to share the love of Christ with all people. We, who like Matthew, have experienced the forgiving love of Christ should be—and need to be—bold in going to our friends, our family, our neighbours, and sharing our faith, our hope, our life in Christ. We, as a church need to be bold in going into the communities of Canada, and through our mission work, into all the world with that saving message of Christ. Not everyone will like what we have to say. The devil certainly hates this message, and continues to work against it. But even the devil cannot stop the church that is empowered by the Holy Spirit to boldly go where others have gone, as we follow Jesus, who leads us from sin's terrible power into the joy of life in God's eternal kingdom. Amen.