

Called by Name: Matthew and Desiring Mercy

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On February 18th, 2018

Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 5:27-32

Today our sermon series on the twelve disciples continues with a look at Matthew, the tax collector. The story of Jesus calling Matthew is told in Matthew's gospel, but also in Mark and Luke. In Luke and Mark, he is called Levi, which is a Hebrew name, hearkening back to one of Jacob's twelve sons who became the founder of the tribe of Levi. Of the 12 tribes, the Levites were the ones who did not inherit land and were set aside to provide priests for the people. The name Levi goes back to Lavah, which means to twine, to join, to unite, to lend or to borrow. Listen first to how Luke tells the story of the call of Levi the tax collector, then for how it is told slightly differently in Matthew's gospel. Both of them probably borrow the story from its first telling in Mark, but put their own twist on it. They both have the Pharisees reacting negatively to the fact that Jesus would want to spend any time with a tax collector, whatever his name is.

After this he went out and saw a tax-collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax-collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

Listen now, in the Gospel of Matthew's version, for how Jesus inserts a call to mercy into his response to the Pharisees.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, 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, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

I think I was in middle school, fittingly enough, when I first learned how to play a little game called Mercy. The game was simple, really, and not actually a lot of fun. Here's how it worked. You put your hand up, palm outstretched and the person you were playing with took the heel of his or her hand and pushed your outstretched fingers back further and further until you cried out in pain, "Mercy!" It was the push-ees way of saying to the push-er, "Enough! Let up... Give me a break." The hope was, of course, that the pusher would stop before breaking the push-ees fingers. In my experience, that was never quite certain.

There are a lot of ways to understand the concept of mercy. Mercy has at times been treated as synonymous with grace, or forgiveness, or kindness, or compassion and it certainly contains elements of all of those. In Hebrew, one word for mercy is *racham*, which is tied to the word for

womb, which suggests that mercy is somehow about comprehending our connection to our source or exhibiting to those in need the kind of love a good mother instinctively has for her children.

All of these are good ways of wrapping our minds around mercy. Which, by the way, isn't so much something to **wrap our minds around** as it is something to **practice, to give, and to receive**. So I find myself going back to that middle school game and what it taught me in my body about what it means to give and receive mercy.

Whether you call him Levi or Matthew (and some scholars resolve the contradiction by saying that he went by two names, or that Jesus renamed him like Simon Peter—Matthew means gift of God in Greek, so maybe he went by both names, Levi Matthew), whatever you call him, the tax collector whom Jesus calls in today's passages probably knew a little something about at least metaphorically bending people's fingers back until they cried for mercy.

I'm not sure there's a time in history when tax collectors have been popular, but they certainly weren't popular in Jesus' day and age, in that time and place. In his commentary on Matthew, Tom Long helps us understand: "We have become so accustomed to the fact that Jesus associated with tax collectors that we have lost the shock value of that affiliation. In first century Roman-occupied Palestine one would probably not utter the words tax collector without spitting. Tax collectors, or publicans as they were sometimes called, were contract workers for the Roman government. They were personally responsible for paying the taxes due from their area, but they were permitted to gather those taxes by gouging as much extra from the citizenry as they could manage. Opportunities for graft, extortion, and theft were almost unlimited, and people simply assumed that every tax collector had his greasy hands deep into other people's pockets."¹

We don't know for certain if Matthew was the exception to what seemed to be the rule or not. Maybe he was just trying to make an honest buck in an empire that was tilted in his favor, trying to make ends meet in a way that supported his lifestyle. What we do know from the story is that something happened that caused him to leave that behind, and we can surmise that when he left that behind he had more to lose, at least materially, than the rest of the disciples—and maybe more than all of them combined. We can also be pretty certain, given the way the story progresses, that the Pharisees thought of Matthew and his ilk as finger-benders—and it bugged the daylight out of them that Jesus and his disciples would associate with such people, people who everyone just knew were sinners and collaborators with the Roman government.

What was it that caused the change in Matthew? What enabled him to leave everything behind and go and follow Jesus? We can't know for sure. Matthew seems to appear out of nowhere at his tax booth, he gets up and immediately follows Jesus, then throws a party, and then Matthew doesn't appear again in the gospels or Acts except for in lists of the disciples. We don't have a lot to go on when it comes to Matthew, but here's my hypothesis. Here's what I imagine. You might imagine something different. That's your prerogative, but here's what I imagine.

I imagine that Matthew's leaving everything behind wasn't as immediate as it seemed. I think he watched how the Roman Empire was engaging in bending people's fingers back, sometimes until they broke. I think Matthew gradually began to see himself as the beneficiary of an unjust system, one that had little regard for the poor and the weak, or for anything much else but profit, and I think it was keeping him up at night.

¹ Thomas G Long, *Matthew*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

That sense of dis-ease nagged at him, like the persistent widow in Jesus' parable in Luke's gospel who kept pleading her case before the judge, until finally the judge caved and gave her what she wanted.

I think maybe Matthew had heard rumors about this man Jesus who was talking about a different sort of Kingdom than the empire, one who'd preached a sermon on a mountain where he said things like, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Something about that grabbed Matthew and it wouldn't let him go. It made Matthew sick and tired to think about how sick and tired and in need of healing his society was, and how sick and tired he himself was, and maybe it made him think about how his Hebrew name Levi was based in a word that meant to unite, to join, to serve, to lend, to borrow—and that he was from a tribe that was not meant to inherit land. And maybe all of this made Matthew contemplate all the things that get sacrificed when individuals and societies make the pursuit of profit and the glorification of violence and the proliferation of fear and the priority of the individual into an idol to worship, an idol that requires sacrifice—including sometimes the sacrifice of children and integrity and well-being. And maybe, just maybe, Matthew became sick and tired of being sick and tired and so that day when Jesus came by offering a different set of priorities and a different purpose to pursue, Matthew said, "Yes, please. Sign me up! But before we go, let's have a party and I'll invite my friends who are complicit in this system, too."

But that's just my reading of Matthew, on the Sunday after another school shooting. You may have your own. For God's sake, though, don't forget that being a disciple has a social and not just an individual dimension.

Of course, the real meat of the story of Matthew's call is in the way the Pharisees react to it. The Pharisees, the good religious folks of the day who saw themselves not as sick but as well, because they knew who to keep in and who to keep out and they kept all the laws and religious observances to the T, including making the proper animal sacrifices. The Pharisees, who in each and every one of the gospels are depicted as grumbling about the way Jesus reaches out to people on the outside of their circle to offer mercy and welcome. The Pharisees, who in their own way practiced the bending back of fingers in the spiritual realm just like the tax-collectors did in the material one. The Pharisees were not happy about Jesus reaching out to a tax collector.

Here's how Tom Long describes their reaction to Jesus calling a tax collector and eating with his brethren: "Tax collectors, then, were carp feeding off the river bottom of Roman rule. For Jesus to call a tax collector as a disciple would be as if he were today to call a political ward heeler in a bribery saturated precinct, a narcotics detective on the take, a mafia don on the CIA payroll. The very act of extending any sort of invitation to such a shady character makes decent people wonder about Jesus' own character."²

Decent people like the Pharisees, who stood there grumbling, "We're decent people. What is Jesus doing reaching out to and eating with someone like a tax collector?"

² Thomas G Long, *Matthew*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

To the Pharisees and to us all, Jesus says,
“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

The Pharisees—imagine that, the good religious folks, the people in the church—were missing what Matthew had found. Mercy.

Maybe they were missing it because they didn’t recognize that they needed it. On the first Sunday of Lent, isn’t it appropriate to think about how we, too, need mercy? When we understand that **we** need mercy, that we need grace, it’s a whole lot easier to grasp that everyone else does, too. It’s easier to show mercy to others when we get that we are not any better than or worse than they are and we stop sacrificing our connection to them in the name of ego, profit, and fear. We share a common humanity. Mercy.

I do love Anne Lamott. I thought about Matthew, and the Pharisees, and you and me and our society when I picked the quote on the cover of our bulletin for today:

“Pope Francis says the name of God is mercy. Our name was mercy, too, until we put it away to become more productive, more admired and less vulnerable. We tend to forget its still there. It’s our unclaimed selves, in the Lost and Found drawer, access to another frequency, like a tuning fork. It startles you when you hear it. You look up and around and respond. It’s part of human nature, the startle reflex. Grace and mercy build on this, on nature. We startle awake. This is part of the mystery, that the humane, humanity, human bodies, are where we experience transcendence and God, restoration, the inclination to serve those who are suffering. We reach out as we are reached out to.”³

Maybe that’s why Matthew followed in the first place. Maybe he was just waiting for somebody to reach out to him. And it somehow startled him awake.

In the preaching classes that I took in seminary, we talked about how in each text we read we should think about which characters we identify with and which characters want our hearers to identify with.

Let me suggest that in this story, we are called to identify with Matthew, and with the Pharisees, and with Jesus. But more important than all of that, we are called to learn what it means that God desires mercy and not sacrifice.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

³ Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, (Riverhead Books, 2017)