

Theme: Jesus calls sinners

Text: **Matthew 9:9-13**

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The Word of God we'll focus on this morning is the Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 9. Let's begin with prayer:

Lord, on you I cast my burden – Sink it in the depths below! Let me know your gracious pardon; Wash me, make me white as snow. Amen.

Who belongs with Jesus? Who belongs here at church? Is it just certain people? Do you have to be good enough to belong? I suppose you can guess from the service we've had so far and from looking at the sermon theme in the bulletin... I'm gonna say that everyone belongs. After all, we are all sinners and sinners need Jesus.

But do we feel that way about everyone? Let me ask that same question in a little bit different way... What kind of person would you feel comfortable sitting next to in church today? Would you be comfortable sitting next to a mother with a noisy kid... or two or three or four...? Would you be comfortable sitting by someone whose love for singing was much greater than their ability? Would it be alright with you if someone sat next to you wearing dirty clothes? What if they were covered in tattoos... or had a dozen piercings?

Ok... maybe most of you, if not all of you would be alright with all those things. But let me ask you that same question in one more way... What kind of person would you invite to church? Now it gets a bit trickier right? I mean, would you invite your gay coworker, your grown son or daughter who left the church long ago, your neighbor who has more kids... and boyfriends... than you can keep track of... The people you don't really like at work or don't really get along with in your family...?

And maybe you tell yourself it's none of your business... you don't want to interfere with their life... they wouldn't want to come here anyways... but let's be honest, we know those aren't good reasons... and they often are simply masks for our fears or our own subjective judgments about others.

What kind of person belongs with Jesus... belongs in the church? We know the answer... it's easy... but actually living like we know the answer isn't always so easy, is it?

And while we're at it, what about you...? Do you belong in the church? Again, you know the answer: The church is for sinners... so yeah, everyone belongs. Okay... but is it for you? Maybe you didn't grow up in the church and so it's a pretty strange experience for you every time you step through these doors. Maybe when you sit here you struggle with feelings of anger toward a God who says he loves you... but after all the loss in your life, all the pain... well, you've got trust issues with God. Maybe you sit there and can barely listen as God's Word is spoken because you feel so trapped in your sin... because you know deep down

that when you leave this place you're going right back to the shame and the lies you hide from everyone... and you just wish you could hide it from God. Maybe you sit there and feel like the forgiveness promised in God's Word isn't for you... for someone who struggles with so much doubt, so much fear, so much confusion...

So, who does belong in the church? Is Jesus really for everyone? Is he really for me? We know the answer, but sometimes it's hard to keep it in mind. Our Scripture readings today remind us that yes, there is a place for all of us, a place for everyone, here at church... because Jesus calls sinners like you and me... he calls us to faith and then to service in his kingdom.

Consider the three men we heard from in our readings today. Let's start with Moses who wrote about his call from God in our first reading from Exodus. Moses lived 3500 years ago in the days when the nation of Israel was totally enslaved and living in Egypt. Except Moses wasn't with his people in Egypt. We were told in verse one of that lesson: **Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian (Exodus 3:1)**. What was Moses doing in a different country? Well... Moses had grown up in Egypt, actually he grew up in the house of the King of Egypt, the Pharaoh. He had been adopted by Pharaoh's daughter as a baby and raised in that royal house. But he knew he wasn't really Egyptian. And when he was older, about 40, he killed an Egyptian that he saw mistreating an Israelite slave. And instead of dealing with the fall out he ran away to the country of Midian to save his own life.

Does this sound like someone God would want... to say nothing of wanting him as a leader of his people...? There was no doubt Moses was unworthy. God even told him to take off his sandals when he approached the place where he met with him because Moses was not worthy. And yet God called him. He had been called to faith years before, and though he had run from his people, his crimes, and his responsibilities, now at the age of 80 God called him to serve as the man who would lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land.

And you'd think Moses would respond with incredible gratitude... but he doesn't. He actually tries to weasel out of it. He says to God, **"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11)**. And the LORD reminds him that the God who always has been and always will be, the God who keeps his promises – the great I AM – he will go with Moses. And after our lesson God also sends Moses with a helper, his brother Aaron, since Moses is still afraid to go.

You see we tend to remember Moses as this great prophet and leader of God's people, he wrote the first five books of the Bible. He was a hero of faith. But remember that it was only by the grace of God that he was all of that. It was God's call to faith and call to service that made Moses the man we know and respect today. And it was God equipping Moses to serve that allowed him to do such amazing things in service to his Lord.

The apostle Paul was really no different. We hear from him in our second reading. You perhaps know that before becoming the great missionary and apostle, this man was known simply by his Jewish name, Saul, and he was a man who terrorized Christians and persecuted the church of Christ. He helped to imprison and kill Christians, including the first Christian killed for his faith in Jesus, a man named Stephen. Yet Jesus chose Paul to not only come to faith in him but to serve him in one of the greatest turn-around stories you'll ever see. Listen again as Paul explains it for us in our second reading: **I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.** ¹³ **Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.** ¹⁴ **The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.** ¹⁵ **Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.** ¹⁶ **But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life (1 Timothy 1:12-16).**

Again, like Moses, we mostly think of Paul as the great apostle to the world who carried the good news into the nations. He's the guy who wrote thirteen letters in the New Testament! He's the guy they name churches after! But remember, it was only by the grace of God that he became all of that. It was God's call to faith and to service that made Paul the man we know today. And like Moses, God equipped Paul to serve him and to share the gospel with the world.

And that brings us to the man who wrote our sermon text: Matthew. By comparison to Moses and Paul, who had been involved in killing people, I suppose Matthew's transgressions look pretty mild. And yet remember what he was when Jesus called him to faith and discipleship. He was a tax collector. This meant he was working with the Romans, so he was considered a traitor to his fellow Jews... he was also labeled as a liar and a greedy little thief because tax collectors like him not only took taxes for Rome but demanded larger payments to line their own pockets. It's not shocking that no one liked tax collectors. In fact, the only people who would hang around with him were other tax collectors and notorious sinners in the community, people like thieves and prostitutes.

Like Moses and Paul there was nothing in Matthew to make him worthy to be part of Jesus' church, much less to serve in it. And yet that's just what happened. He was called to faith. He likely heard Jesus before his call to follow like the other disciples did, and you can tell Jesus' call to faith had worked on Matthew's heart because when Jesus called him to service, he answered immediately. And then, he threw a party so Jesus could meet all his sinner friends.

Like Moses and Paul, we marvel at a man like Matthew who was one of the twelve apostles. He was the first man to write a Gospel biography about Jesus. And yet just like Moses and Paul we recognize it was only by the grace of God that Matthew was what he became.

And of course, the beauty of all this is that if God can call men like Moses and Paul and Matthew to faith... if he could call them to service in his church... well then I know that am not so far gone that God can't save me too... and give me work to do in his kingdom.

We all know our own past. Maybe you have dark things in your past you don't want anyone to know. Maybe you've killed people. Maybe you've abused people. Maybe you've kept silent while others did wicked things. Maybe you've found addiction to be your constant enemy. Or perhaps its pride that seeks to drag you away from God as you look down on everyone around you. Whatever darkness lies in our past or is waiting at home in our present... Jesus' words ring out loud and true for us today: **It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**

Despite our many sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, Christ still says out loud, "I came for you." But he didn't just talk about it. He backed it up with action. The same Jesus who said he came to save sinners, lived a holy life, a worthy life before God, and he says that life is ours through faith in him. The same Jesus who said he came to earn peace for sinners, did just that, by suffering on the cross for every sin we've ever committed or will ever commit. And this same Jesus who said that he is the **way, and the truth, and the life**... kept his promise by walking out of a grave alive on Easter... assuring us that trust in him means not only peace with God, and worth in God's sight... but eternal life with God in heaven.

You see this means *you* belong with Jesus. *You* belong here in church. And so do the people in our lives that need Jesus just as much as we do. Martin Luther once described our role as people who share Jesus with others as the role of a beggar. We are just one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. We have no special qualities other than we know the news that frees us from guilt in life and from fear in death. And knowing this great good news we'll do all we can to give it away to those who need it too. It means that like Matthew we'll invite our "sinner" friends to come meet here with Jesus... we'll tell them this is where they belong. This church is for all.

It's for people with tattoos... people who dye their hair... people who wear suits, and people who wear ripped jeans. This church is for people with white skin, or black skin, or brown skin... This place is for teens

struggling with depression... kids who get angry at their parents... those who struggle with pornography... This church is for recovering addicts... and current addicts... it's for women who've had an abortion... and the men who encouraged them to do it... this church is for the unwed mother and the lonely widow. This church is for your next-door neighbor and your college roommate... for your best friend and your worst enemy.

This church is for you. This church is for me. It's for everyone. Because, you see, this place is not some museum for saints, some playground where perfect people come to play and talk about how good we all are... no, it's a hospital for sinners... a triage tent set up in the spiritual battlefield of this life. It's where bruised and battered and broken sinners like you and me can gather together not to see how good we are, but to see again and again just how good Jesus is.

And so here we are! Here to worship the Savior. To hear his Word and taste his forgiveness. To have our wounds dressed by the great Physician of our souls... and to have our sorrows shared by our brothers and sisters in Christ who know our failures and our brokenness and still love us anyways... because they have a Savior that loves them unconditionally too... a Savior whose anguish and death on a cross paid for an eternity of hell for every last one of us... a Savior who spilled his blood to blot out every last lust and lie of our hearts... and who walked out of a grave alive as the guarantee that we will too.

Don't ever forget how much you are loved. Don't forget how far Jesus was willing to go to keep you safe forever... and don't forget that because of Jesus you have a place in the church...a place with him forever...Yes, Jesus has called you to faith and to service in his kingdom, and because of him you belong. Amen.