

Sermon for the Feast of St. Matthew

September 21, 2019

Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew tells a wonderful story. It's a story about Jesus encountering a stranger in Capernaum and calling him to follow him. The calling of Matthew is so important that it occurs in all three synoptic Gospels. Mark and Luke refer to him as Levi, but all three describe the Calling of Matthew briefly, in only about two sentences. Here in Matthew it says "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." It is an extraordinary story of a man who abandoned all he had, and all he was, to follow Jesus, and it is also a story about how God sees us.

Jesus, as a devout Jew, should have seen Matthew, a tax collector, as the enemy. Tax collectors, or publicans, were hated by the Jews for extracting hard-earned money from innocent people to give to the unrelentingly violent Roman machine of Empire. A Jewish tax collector was even worse. Matthew, as a Jew, would have been seen as a traitor not only for serving the evil Roman system, but also for being a shameless swindler and profiteer who was motivated to extract more and more taxes from his fellow Jews in order to increase his own wealth.

But Jesus was not like us. He did not see human beings the way we do – as either enemy or ally. As God incarnate, he saw the people he encountered in ancient Judea as they truly were – as his beloved children.

I have always been astonished at the number of people I encounter who try to tell me all the reasons that God does not love them. They tell me they wouldn't be allowed in any church

because they are so sinful and horrible, God does not want them there. The homeless people I encountered in my work at Saint Mary's always tried to tell me the reasons why God didn't love them. They'd say "I'm a lying, stealing drug addict and God knows that." or "After all the bad things I've done my whole family hates me, and I know God hates me too." One of them had been a rich and powerful drug dealer. Another one had served 20 years in prison for killing a man. All of them believed that God had rejected them a long time ago, the first time they ever did something wrong.

I tried to explain to them that nothing they could ever do, no matter how horrible they thought it was, would ever make God stop loving them. They were always surprised at the idea that God wanted them to be happy. God, I told them, did not excuse or condone sinful behavior, but God instead yearned for all of us to turn from that behavior, follow him and find joy in walking by his side. God's heart, I told them, is broken when we turn away from him and do things that bring us destruction and unhappiness. He always waits for us to come back to him.

When Jesus encountered a tax collector, the enemy, in a town in Galilee not far from where he encountered Peter and Andrew, he looked into that man's heart instead of seeing what was on the surface. He might have seen that Matthew, like other people who center their lives around money, was motivated under his greed by fear, and he might have seen where that fear originated. Maybe it came from a childhood in which Matthew and his family were so poor that it caused deep scars of deprivation, or starvation. Maybe Matthew was so terrified of the Roman Empire that he did anything he could to please them, including something that caused him to be hated by his own people. Whatever it was, God saw it. He saw the fear in his beloved child's

heart and he called him to a better way of life.

When I spoke to the homeless people at St. Mary's about God's love for them, I would tell them that God knew their hearts and he saw why they did the things that they had done. He saw the abuse and the poverty of their childhoods, the trauma of military conflict some of them had endured, and he saw the many, insurmountable obstacles placed in the path of people of color by an unfair economic and social system. God, I told them, knew their pain and he knew their true worth, and he wanted them to turn and follow him.

Jesus not only called Matthew, this tax collector, this enemy, to follow him. He also made him one of the Twelve Apostles and he entrusted the message of the Gospel to him, to spread throughout the world. Matthew was a Jewish man: educated, well read and articulate, and he was uniquely qualified to communicate Jesus' message to the Jews. God saw his true worth, and in Matthew standing up and immediately abandoning his tax booth, he saw his willingness.

In closing, I'll tell one more short story. When Sister Victoria and I were in England we visited a drop-in center for homeless prostitutes in Bristol called One25. As we all sat down to share lunch together at the drop-in center, one of the prostitutes said, as she sat down between me and Sister Anne "Well look at me. I get to sit down with the holy!" I laughed and said "Oh none of us are holy. We're all sinners in God's sight." And she said "I'm a lot worse sinner than you all. God wouldn't let me go anywhere near a church." I said to her: "You know I used to think that exact same thing about myself, but really God loves every single one of us and he loves to see us in church, no matter how awful we think we are."

I sincerely hope that I helped that woman in Bristol to at least begin thinking about the truth of how God sees us and knows our hearts. I hope that she can someday fully realize that she, like all of us is worthy, and loved, and called to follow God.