

Matthew 9:9-13

9 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.

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹²But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

It is such a pleasure to have the opportunity to support the life of our church by assisting in worship over the next six weeks. I have not had the opportunity to meet so many of you, and I really look forward to our conversations after worship and the chance to discern together as we anticipate the call of our next senior minister. My full-time job is at St. Norbert College where I'm the Director of Spiritual Life & Community Service. I love working with college students because it's such a transformative time in their lives. You may know or remember that the years between eighteen and twenty-two are the very edge of adulthood—a time when young people are really beginning to examine their assumptions about the world, and the opinions and judgements of others still carry a lot of weight. With enough support and courage, young people emerge from college with a strong enough understanding and acceptance of themselves to live with meaning and embody a sacred commitment to justice, wisdom and authenticity.

One of my favorite questions that I hear from students is, “Can I be real with you?” After that, they usually lean in or take a step toward me and say something in a hushed voice that they think is going to shock me. I love it when I hear this question because if a young person asks, “Can I be real with you?” They already intuit that they can. People aren’t usually doing so well when they begin with, “Can I be real with you?” They have been carrying around a major question or concern deep within themselves, and they don’t know if the world is hospitable enough to hold the weight of that with them. I think we’ve all felt this way, but not everyone summons the courage to express it or knows someone caring enough to be a supportive presence.

In today’s reading, Matthew is a tax collector—a position that put him in kahoots with the violence of the Roman Empire and made him an outcast from his own people. The father of one of my son’s best friends works for the IRS and does tax audits. His name is Marcus. What’s the first thing you think or feel when you hear that someone is a tax auditor? I doubt that attitudes about tax collectors have changed a whole lot over the years. One major difference is that people who fail to pay taxes in our time can be fined and, in extreme cases, may serve time in jail. In Jesus’ time, people who challenged the authority of the Roman Empire, including those who failed to pay their taxes, were crucified. Imagine, for a moment, if Marcus had to hand down death sentences to people who failed to pay their taxes. How odd, then, for Jesus to walk up to Matthew’s tax booth and say, “Follow me.” It must have been a shocking moment for Peter, Andrew, James, and the other disciples already following Jesus. It likely felt dangerous. A friend of mine asked me once, “Do you know what

Jesus' best miracle was? He was a man older than thirty with 12 friends." So, why would Jesus risk his social capital on a tax collector?

We often read the calling stories throughout the Bible with an attitude of reverence and admiration. You might think of Moses and the burning bush or Noah building an ark. I think it's more helpful to read them as stories of risk. Jesus and the disciples risked their reputations on a tax collector. Matthew risked the security and authority of his title and position. But, Matthew's relationship to the power of the Roman Empire, and the resulting isolation from his own people, must have been so unbearable that he was no longer worried about his boss coming by and finding his tax booth empty. I have to imagine that Jesus was the kind of person whose presence made it immediately clear that you could be real with him. Not just that, I believe that the longer you hung around with Jesus and his followers, the more you started to realize how unsatisfying everything else was. My eighth grade son worries about his grades. I worry about my job security. Some people worry that if they are open about who they love, or how they've been hurt, or what they no longer believe, then they'll be put out of their community. There are so many tax booths that keep us bound up in systems that don't work for a lot of people. But, Matthew must have been beyond the point of caring about his security or authority because he was so isolated by his role in an oppressive system. Jesus said, "Follow me," and he did. If you feel dejected at work, or with politics, or at home, then maybe you're in the exact right place to become a disciple.

If you worry that maybe you're not cut out to follow the way of Jesus, then I have good news for you. Jesus says, "Go and learn what this

means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" In the original Greek, the word "learn" comes from the same root as the word "disciple." So, becoming a disciple means you are someone who wants to learn. The humility inherent to this kind of discipleship is precisely what makes mercy possible. When Jesus approaches Matthew at the tax booth, he sees the dignity of another human being compromised by the sin of an oppressive system. Later that night, Jesus is the least powerful person at the dinner where he is accused of keeping bad company. The Pharisees are the religious leaders of their community. Matthew has been a tax collector for the Roman Empire. They are participating in systems that pit them against each other and leave Jesus and his followers stuck in the middle.

And Jesus handles it so skillfully. He says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," which is a quote from the prophet Hosea in the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus is quoting scripture back to the Pharisees, whose job is to interpret scripture for their people. Jesus and the Pharisees are both trying to be faithful to their tradition. They are equally part of a minoritized group that the Roman Empire would rather not exist. But, Jesus embodies a faith that refuses to leave anyone behind. Jesus goes to people who most obviously represent what is either not of God or not important according to the prevailing powers. A tax collector and a fisherman. A leper and a sinner. Who would he hangout with today? An IRS agent and a factory worker. An opioid addict and an illegal immigrant. One of the pivotal disagreements that stalled the recent debt-ceiling discussions was about whether or not we would impose work requirements that make it harder for people experiencing food-insecurity to qualify for federal aid. We did, partly because I did not take the time to write to my Representative

and express my objection. Our own state legislature is in heated debate about how to spend an \$8 billion surplus. At the same time, 14% of our children in this state live in poverty. I will continue writing to my Representatives and Senators about that.

Later in the gospel of Matthew, a Pharisee asks Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” God does not require sacrifice. God requires love. God desires mercy. This is the wisdom of our tradition and it was the wisdom of the Jewish tradition that Jesus made the focus of his ministry. But, it’s risky.

Jesus calls disciples who can be real with each other and want to learn to live mercifully. He doesn’t ask for sacrifice; mercy is much harder. You can’t do mercy with a stiff upper lip, and most people don’t make mercy their New Year’s resolution. Mercy requires the gentleness of compassion and the humility of peace. I don’t know about you, but I find that way of being very hard.

Our time is not very different from Jesus’ because it’s people we sacrifice when we refuse to live mercifully. It’s children living in poverty; inequitable access to healthcare in communities of color; hatred and violence against LGBTQIA+ children of God; economic systems that depend on invisible international slave labor. It’s really scary when you stop to think about how little mercy there really is in our world. But, Jesus doesn’t ask for fully-formed disciples. He asks for people who want to learn. Jesus calls us toward the world-altering, system-shattering strength of mercy. Jesus calls us

away from the empty tax booths of our lives—exploitative systems, unspent surpluses, marital feuds, grudges between siblings, devotion to a flag or an ideology over the human dignity that God has put in us all. Last week, Reverend Cartmell said, “We don’t just talk about our faith.” Jesus says, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” We have an active faith. Go and learn. Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. Follow me. God, give us the courage to do so. Amen.