

Sermon - Proper 5, Year A
The Calling of Matthew/Discipleship
6/11/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are thousands of pages of illuminated manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Hundreds of them are opulently illustrated scenes from the Gospels, and a good portion of these feature the Gospel writers themselves. It is common in these Medieval and Renaissance texts to find a portrait of the evangelist right at the beginning of the book – a sort of author photo from a book jacket, but placed at the very beginning instead of the very end. Most of these hundreds of representations feature the gospeller as they might have appeared at the peak of their personal sanctity. They are shown engaged in their holy labor – writing at a desk, perhaps, surrounded by their symbols of power and often with a representation of angels or the Holy Spirit somewhere nearby.

But there is one manuscript among the many that features a notable difference. There is a page of a manuscript from the 15th century that presents St. Matthew. What is notable is that the illumination is divided into two scenes. At the top, we find St. Matthew as he is often portrayed: he is writing, a nimbus of gold surrounding his head, an angel right before him clearly offering dictation or inspiration for the Gospel. But at the bottom, there is another scene. It is a depiction of Matthew right at the moment he meets Jesus. He is sitting at a counting table, surrounded by stacks of coins. It is clear he is concentrating, perhaps even lost in the work, and even though it is a static scene, the artist has found a way of rendering the appearance of Jesus so that his presence there feels like an interruption. Jesus looks directly at the tax collector. His hand points directly to Matthew's heart. His posture is clear: "You. I want *you*." In one of the striking details of the illumination, the table at which Matthew is first sitting to count money in the lower portion

appears again in the upper, but – like Matthew – it has been transformed. It has become, of all things, an altar.

The calling of St. Matthew happens quickly in the Gospel. This ninth chapter is filled with urgency and action – it is ripe with the miracles of Jesus, moving from one story of healing and redemption to the next. It's almost as if Matthew would rather not draw too much attention to himself. He is careful to point emphatically toward Jesus as the subject and source of his Gospel, but this calling is an astonishing act of grace.

We are familiar with the language of the Bible that portrays tax collectors as lumped in with the sinners, but it is easy for us to underestimate how genuinely these poor souls were loathed. In the Roman empire at the time of Jesus, taxes were levied heavily on the Jewish communities, and it was common practice for the Romans to recruit or demand that the taxes be collected by a local representative of the community. Collaborating with the Romans was considered a betrayal of your people. If you were the one who collected the Roman tax, your entire family was shunned. In fact, some of the tax collectors might have turned to corruption not out of any intrinsic selfishness, but because they were unable to participate in the rest of the market of the community. So the Romans hated you for being Jewish, and the Jewish community hated you because you collaborated with the Romans, perhaps cheating them of money that you were skimming off the top.

It's a mess all around – and easy to imagine why so many of the people of Jesus' day recognized tax collectors with the same judgment reserved for prostitutes. Matthew is not a respectable person to call into ministry. He does not have a Masters in Divinity or volunteer at the Historical Society. This is the man you tell your children to avoid. But then there's Jesus – standing before the counting table and pointing straight at his heart: “You. I want *you*.”

Jesus knew exactly who Matthew was when he called to him. Jesus knew Matthew's sins. He knew his fears and his failures, and still his call was insistent: "follow me." And he got up and followed him.

I wonder when you first heard those words. I wonder what they have meant to you. One of the great privileges of ministry is that I have been entrusted with so many stories of how people have encountered God – sometimes against their will! – and each one is as precious to me as breath. Some people heard Jesus call to them as children, perhaps gently and steadily in the voice of a beloved teacher or grandparent. Some people meet Jesus during a time of crisis or desperation, they are in chaos and then suddenly rooted in irrational beauty and strength. I love to hear students tell stories of finding their faith in campus ministries. I love retreats where people gather in intimate, holy places and entrust one another with large questions. I love when we can be uncertain together – when we can admit that the call of Jesus can sometimes feel hard to hear and that even when we do hear it, it can be overwhelming to imagine what could possibly come next. I love to imagine each one of us at our counting tables, absorbed in our work, perhaps even our sins, and then suddenly he is there, his hand pointing straight at our hearts: "You. I want *you*."

We don't know precisely what happened to Matthew after he got up and followed Christ. Church tradition for centuries has held that Matthew preached throughout Judea before traveling to Ethiopia where he ministered before he was martyred for his faith. But we know one vital, revolutionary thing: Matthew told the story. He heard the call to follow Jesus, and he wrote it down. He allowed his story to be knit into the story of the savior of the world, and he gave it to others. He gave it to us.

This is our blessing too. When we get up from the table to follow Christ, we do not know what this discipleship will demand from us. We don't know where we will be led or whom we will be called to love, but we must keep telling the story. We must write about it and talk about it and wonder about it and hold it up to the light – we must let it change us.

Let this vital call turn our counting tables into holy altars. Let Christ turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Let this faith be the story we proclaim not only with our lips but with our lives. Listen for his call to you, and let nothing be more precious than what you hear.

Amen.