

St. Matthew – Genuine Faith to be Imitated in Faith

Today—September 21st—is the day we commemorate St. Matthew. Now, before we go any further, it is good to remember *why* we take special time to commemorate saints like Matthew. It's sad, but there are many Christian congregations—Lutheran included—who simply don't do this. Many a Lutheran, whose creed is *"this is what we've always done,"* has never heard of such a "Catholic thing" taking place in the context of a Lutheran worship service. And yet—ironically—***this is what we've always done.*** As our Synod puts it, *"Lutherans have always understood that there is great benefit in remembering the saints whom God has given to the Church. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Article 21) lists three reasons for such honor. First, we thank God for giving faithful servants to His Church. Second, through such remembrance our faith is strengthened as we see the mercy that God extended to His saints of old. Third, these saints are examples both of faith and of holy living to imitate according to our calling in life."* This is exactly what we hear in the book of Hebrews: *"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith"* (Heb 13:7).

Back to St. Matthew. A little background: As we all know, Matthew was a tax collector in his hometown of Capernaum. This is important. Capernaum is where a large portion of Jesus' ministry took place. This is where Peter, Andrew, James and John were from. Jesus spent a LOT of time in Capernaum, preaching and teaching and working miracles, which means that Matthew had lots of opportunities to be in the presence of Jesus and hear Jesus. Matthew didn't leave a lucrative job on a whim to follow a pure stranger.

Let's talk about that lucrative job. Being a tax collector in Roman-controlled Judea was certainly well-paying, yes. With Rome backing you, you also had job security too. ***But it didn't make you very popular with your own people.*** In fact, tax collectors were **hated** by their fellow Jews. They were seen as traitors and thieves; the very epitome of what it meant to be an "unrighteous sinner." They were "Judases" before Judas. Tax collectors picked the pockets of their own brothers and sisters in the name of pagan Caesar (which was already bad enough, working for the pagan enemy). Worse than that, though, they had no issue with taking extra (quite a bit extra) from their fellow descendants of Abraham; ***a "service charge," so to speak.*** And why not? Rome approved of the practice. Rome had their back, so what could the Jews do about it? If you liked money, and you didn't have too many scruples in how you made that money, ***then tax collector was the job for you.*** Needless to say, Matthew (or Levi, as was his Jewish name), wasn't getting invited to a whole lot of get-togethers. ***He was a pariah; a rich pariah, but a pariah nonetheless.***

But here's the thing: ***The Word of God works... even on pariahs, traitors, and covetous, greedy thieves!*** Our Lord Christ, in His incomprehensible compassion, knowing how His Word had penetrated the heart of Matthew over their repeated encounters, comes to this rich pariah at his little place of employment, ***and calls him to leave it all behind and follow Him.***

A couple of brief noteworthy things here. First off, our Lord has ***compassion*** on even the lowliest and foulest people; people we might be tempted to say aren't worthy/deserving of such compassion. ****Who among us is though?*** And yet... it always seems to be different in our case, doesn't it? Second, our Lord comes to Matthew. Jesus doesn't sit back and wait for Matthew to get his act together and come to Him. The devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh will ***ALWAYS*** give you a million-and-one reasons to put off ***repentance and return to Christ.*** Jesus comes to Matthew and meets Matthew right where he's at. Third, the Lord's call to follow Him means **leaving it all behind.** ***"You can't serve two masters. You'll either love one and hate the other, or you'll be serve one and despise/forsake the other. You can't serve God and mammon."*** Jesus wasn't calling Matthew to follow Him when it was convenient or when he could work it into his schedule/budget. To follow Jesus meant to leave the tax booth, the income generated by the tax booth, and that entire way of life behind. ***Matthew was being called to an entirely new life.***

And Matthew did just that. ***He left it all behind for the sake of Christ.*** In fact, just half a chapter later, and our Lord chooses twelve men (out of the many who had become disciples) to be His apostles. Matthew is one of these twelve. Jesus then immediately sends these twelve apostles out on their first mission trip, giving them power and authority to cast out demons, to heal the sick, to cleanse lepers, and raise the dead, instructing them very purposefully to go to the lost sheep of Israel, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come in the work/person of Jesus Christ. God's Word and Promise of the Messiah was being fulfilled in the person of Jesus, and the miracles they would perform would bear witness to this.

Do you remember ***what else*** Jesus commanded these twelve before sending them out? ***"Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money. Don't take an extra tunic or sandals."*** ***Leave everything behind and trust in the Lord... and Matthew did just that.*** That's a commendable faith; a praiseworthy faith worthy of emulation and imitation. Matthew wasn't a Christian-in-name-only. He wasn't a Christian only when it was convenient or when he could afford it, following along with the things he liked and agreed with, but doing his own thing in the areas where he and Jesus saw things differently. Nope. The Lord led, and Matthew followed, leaving ***everything*** behind to do so.

Let's also take a moment to talk about the ***joy*** Matthew felt in being called by Christ to leave everything behind and follow Him. In/through faith, Matthew understood that the life he was leaving behind was a life that was leading only to

darkness and abandonment. He knew he was a pariah amongst his own people, ***but to be a pariah in relation to God? That's terrifying!*** And yet... here, in merciful compassion and grace that only God Himself can have, Matthew is being called to join the Lord; to become His brother and friend. ***Matthew was loved! Jesus loved him and wanted to Matthew to be with Him, not just in time, but in eternity.***

This repentant joy bore good fruit. This Christ-centered joy overflowed immediately in the form of a feast. ***Matthew couldn't contain himself. He spent lavishly.*** Matthew, in his joy of being united to Christ and forgiven all his sin; in his joy for being given new life in Christ, pulls out all the stops and throws a huge feast. He spared no expense. But do keep in mind: this feast wasn't just a celebration for his new life in Christ. ***It was also to bring all the other "reprobates" and "sinners" to Christ.*** Matthew ***genuinely*** wanted his fellow tax collectors and "sinners" to know and to have the same joy in Christ that he did. He didn't just talk the game so many of us do. He put his money where his mouth is. He threw this huge lavish feast ***for their sakes.*** He gave all that he had so that others could have the opportunity to come to Christ, who was the guest of honor. That's a praiseworthy faith; a faith worth emulating and imitating.

The Pharisees? Perhaps they weren't invited, but I don't believe that to be the case. Matthew knew the pain of being excluded. He wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy... even a Pharisee. ***It's not that they weren't invited. It's that they refused to attend.*** "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" Eww... gross! I know we shake our heads in disgust at this Pharisaical arrogance... ***but should we?*** Many a Christian and many a congregation talks a good game about wanting to reach out to the poor and lowly in their midst. "*Help the homeless!*" ***That's what good Christians do, right?*** And yet... the biggest fear (unspoken, but still very real) is that those poor and lowly, who don't look like you or sound like you or act like you or drive a car like you or smell like you... they might actually come and join the country club you call "church." ***Heaven-forbid!*** "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Those who have ears to hear, will hear. The rest will just be offended.

And that takes us to the final little point I want to make about St. Matthew. Have you ever had the "pleasure" of someone who's life was a total mess give you advice? You know all the skeletons in their closet. You know their history and reality. The class floozie is now giving advice on chastity. The guy who has a couple of affairs and divorces under his belt is now giving marital advice. ***"Who do you think you are? Where do you get off telling me anything?" "I'm a changed man!"*** **Yeah... sure you are.** We've all been there. We think of that person as a hypocrite, and ***NOBODY*** likes a hypocrite! (Nevermind the fact that we're all raging hypocrites ourselves! Can you imagine if everyone else knew all

the skeletons in your closet, both past and present? Yeah... but our hypocrisy is somehow different, isn't it?) **Nobody likes a hypocrite!** This is *especially* true when it comes to matters of faith. Total sinful trash before (and we know it. We know all those skeletons in their closet), but now they've found Jesus! They've changed! ***Yeah, right! I'm not listening to you, you hypocrite!***

Welcome to Matthew's world. "*Who do you think you are?!*" And yet... he didn't care what anyone thought about him. ***His joy and peace weren't dependent on the opinions of his fellow sinful hypocrites.*** His joy and peace were centered up on and flowed forth from Christ, and Christ alone. From the day he was called out of the sinful darkness and into the marvelous light of Christ, he walked that walk of repentant faith. He proclaimed the Good News of Christ, not just with words, but with his very life. ***He knew that Christ-centered joy from first-hand experience, and he wanted everyone to have what he had.*** He preached, beginning in Jerusalem and Judea, eventually making his way all the way to Ethiopia, where he was ultimately murdered for the Gospel message he proclaimed. He gave **everything** for the sake of Christ; ***for the sake of and for the joy of being known by Christ and loved in Christ.*** That's a commendable faith; a truly Christ-centered faith and Christ-centered joy that actually bore the good, God-pleasing fruits that are in keeping with true repentance. That's what those who've been truly changed in Christ do. ***Changed men live changed lives.*** That's not a command. That's a reality; the blessed reality of St. Matthew.

So... before we call it a day, let's revisit those three reasons we Lutherans observe "feast days" that highlight a particular saint. "*First, we thank God for giving faithful servants to His Church.*" Do we have good and holy reason to thank God for St. Matthew and for his faithful service to our Lord and His Church? **Absolutely!** If you have any doubts, read the Gospel of Matthew! "*Second, through such remembrance our faith is strengthened as we see the mercy that God extended to His saints of old.*" Does St. Matthew's reality—the reprobate tax collector and traitor and thief... ***in his old life;*** the called and redeemed man, chosen and called and redeemed purely by God's grace—***does his blessed reality strengthen you in your faith; your sinful and hypocritical reality?*** Does Matthew's new life in Christ give you blessed hope and assurance of the new life you've been baptized into in Christ? I would hope so! "*Third, these saints are examples both of faith and of holy living to imitate according to our calling in life.*" Does St. Matthew's life of faith and obedience; his willing desire to leave it all behind for the sake of Christ—***for the joy of being known by Christ and loved in Christ***—does his life and faith give you something to emulate and imitate? Without a doubt! And that's where we'll leave it. May God grant that we actually put this blessed faith into action in all our words and deeds, all the days we walk this side of eternity. Like St. Matthew, may all our words and deeds flow forth from, be centered upon, and redound in praise and thanksgiving to the glory of Christ alone! **AMEN**