

Turning Point
Matthew 9:9-13
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In 2002, Jennifer and I went to what was then called the Dixie Classic Fair in Winston-Salem and attended a concert in the grandstand primarily used for tractor pulls and rodeos. The Dixie Classic, as you might expect, was not exactly known for pulling in A-list entertainment—you could definitely expect a fun show, but you weren't going to see an act that would be playing Madison Square Garden the next week. The couple we went with—and I'm not making this up—left halfway through the show to go check out the pigs.

The concert we saw was Percy Sledge, the 1960s R&B singer known primarily for his first hit, "When A Man Loves A Woman." Percy, who is no longer with us, brought a lot of energy to his show, singing with a great deal of feeling. Sadly, I can't remember much about the show except that he definitely played "When A Man Loves A Woman" and "Take Time To Know Her," his second-biggest hit, and that we had fun even though we didn't know Percy's catalogue particularly well.

What I do remember with crystal clarity is this: after the show, we trekked through the rodeo dirt in the grandstand to meet Percy. We stood in line with other people doing the same thing. When it was our turn, we handed him a couple of albums that we'd bought used earlier that week for him to sign. He looked at each of us dead in the eye and said—with an incredible amount of sincerity—"thank you for listening to my music." I have never listened to Percy Sledge the same way since that moment. His songs—well, his song—immediately sounded more earnest and more heartfelt.

It was a brief moment in my life, but it was enough for me to feel like I understood the character of Percy Sledge.

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Today we begin a new sermon series that will take us through the season of Lent, a series that focuses on six of the disciples, one each week, as we draw closer to the death of Good Friday and the resurrection of Easter. I'm not sure where the idea of focusing on disciples came from, because the truth is that most of them don't really have very detailed biographies in scripture. At least a third appear in name only, and some of those are identified by different names depending on where in the gospels they appear.

Another third are characterized only by one brief story, just a few verses that offer us any insight into who these men were and why they ended up following Jesus. If you're doing the math in your pew, you've already realized that we'll need to focus on at least a few of the apostles in this group in order to fill the six weeks ahead of us. Fortunately, even though those stories are brief, some are still packed with meaning, even falling in among our most memorable narratives in all of the scripture.

The disciple we start this series with, Matthew, is one who does indeed appear only briefly...but he is not one who has a memorable narrative. You would expect Matthew to be a heavily featured disciple, given the fact that he shares his name with a canonical gospel, but he is not. In fact, in all of our scripture, he is accentuated in but one single verse, Matthew 9:9, "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." Apart from lists of disciples, verse 9:9 is the only time Matthew appears in our scripture. That's it—enough for this gospel to be traditionally attributed to Matthew the Disciple, but not enough for us to know really anything about his personality. Matthew has a surprisingly short Wikipedia page.

And yet, because of how this verse is located in the gospel of Matthew, it tells us a fair bit about the role the apostle Matthew plays in Jesus' ministry. It is just enough to understand Matthew's character.

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First, it's worth examining the scene that takes place just before this one. In the first part of this chapter, Jesus returns to Capernaum and is immediately approached by a crowd of people carrying a paralyzed man. These people have clearly heard of Jesus before. They are aware of his ability to heal people—we are, at this point, in the ninth chapter of Matthew, and Jesus has already been making the rounds and performing various miracles. The crowd believes in him.

What Jesus does here, however, is different from what he has done previously. Before he says "you are cured; get up and walk," he tells the man "Take heart; your sins are forgiven." This is an audacious claim, a claim that the scribes will call blasphemous. This is a claim that only Jesus—only the Son of God—can make authentically. But, to show that he has made it authentically, he also heals the paralytic, and the crowds are amazed.

The story that immediately follows the call of Matthew has a lot of similarities to the scene with the paralytic. In this one, Jesus is sharing a meal with a group of tax collectors. As I'm sure you know, these were not the most popular people in Jesus' day. They were wealthy at the expense of others, open to bribery and other shenanigans, and generally despised by the masses. A tax collector was like the landlord who refuses to make improvements to the house your renting, then charges you more anyway, takes you to court when you can't pay the increased rent, wins, and then sneers smugly at you on his way out of the courtroom. Tax collectors were a group who chose themselves over all others, and who chose a lonely life as a result.

But in this scene, they are gathered with Jesus: someone poor and honest, someone who others expect to despise these tax collectors but who instead is willing to eat with them. Again, this is something that baffles the Pharisees, again they question Jesus' disciples, and he again answers with one of those fantastic one-liners that leaves everyone speechless: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but rather the sick."

And then, one more story. This time it is John's disciples who approach Jesus with a question about fasting. It's noteworthy that it's John's disciples—this is not a group trying to trap or condemn Jesus but rather a group simply trying to understand. Jesus again answers swiftly and succinctly. His answer—often summarized as "new wineskins for new wine"—is another reply in the vein of his words throughout this chapter. It is another mark of change.

Jesus is proclaiming, in each of these stories, that his ministry is pivoting. He is moving from one who heals only bodies to one who also forgives sins; from one whose followers are righteous to one whose followers are also sinners; from the old wineskins to the new. He is, in fact, separating himself from John and the other prophets, establishing himself as not merely a prophet but as the Messiah himself. That distinction occurs when he pardons sins and dines with tax collectors. These verses in the middle of Matthew are the turning point in Jesus' gospel.

And these verses include the call of Matthew himself. Through this association, the apostle Matthew himself becomes the turning point in Jesus' ministry.

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The turn is twofold. The first part of this is that, prior to the events of this chapter, the crowd following Jesus was chiefly focused on physical or earthly concerns. Jesus' miracles, likewise, mainly consisted of healing leprosy, paralysis, and fever. But when this man comes to him, Jesus senses the need for a different kind of healing, for the healing of the soul.

I exchanged multiple emails this week with a woman who connected with our church last weekend at Mosaic. She began by saying thanks, but as the conversation unfolded, she adopted a more confessional tone. She acknowledged to me that she hadn't been to church in quite some time because she just hadn't been able to find a church where she felt like she fit in.

She then told me that she worried about the current state of Christianity because it seemed—and this is my paraphrasing of her words—it seemed that the Church was more concerned with the earthly than it was with the spiritual. The Church was trying to appease people on all fronts, to meet all of society's concerns at any given moment. The Church was desperate to be popular. The result was that Christianity had lost some of what had made it distinctive in the first place, of what lies at the very heart of who we are. This, as much as anything, had made it hard for her to find her place in church.

There is nothing wrong with healing the sick, or addressing society's concerns, or even wanting to be popular. Some of those are actions that Jesus actively encourages us to pursue. But those things cannot take the place of the healing of the soul. Jesus makes this clear when he pardons the paralytic, when he calls Matthew to follow him, and when he dines with tax collectors. Jesus came to improve our sacred connection to God; without that connection, the rest is insufficient.

The second part of Jesus' turn is that, in calling Matthew to follow him and in dining with tax collectors, he makes it clear that he has come not only for the pious worshipers in the temple but also for the outside forces of Rome. As a tax collector, Matthew would have been literate in Greek and would have been identified as a collaborator with the Roman guard. When Jesus says to Matthew "follow me," he is reaching beyond—reaching beyond the temple leadership of scribes and Pharisees, but even reaching beyond the Jewish fishermen whom he called a few chapters earlier.¹

¹ There is some irony here given the fact that the gospel of Matthew is generally viewed as a gospel written primarily for the Jews. In this case, the character of Matthew is distinctively different from the gospel named after him.

I suspect that many of you have contemplated who the “Romans” are in our world today. The truth is that they are slightly different for each of us, because they are the people we fear and detest the most. When Jesus calls Matthew, he is saying to his followers (then and now) that he values the people that they fear and detest the most. He wants those despised people to follow him, he wants to share a meal with them, and he even wants to turn them into the leaders and the pillars of his church. It is a challenging thought, that Jesus would so value the very people we fear and detest.

The turning point of the apostle Matthew, then, is that Jesus makes it clear that he is here to pardon and mend the brokenness in the souls of all.

It is not a turning point that will be well-received. The Pharisees will keep a closer eye on him going forward, unnerved that he presumes to pardon sins and fearful of what else he might claim. The Romans too—who were pretty willing to let him make noise among the Jews—will be less excited once that noise bleeds into their Roman arena. The chapters in the gospel Matthew following its namesake’s call will largely constitute conflict, culminating in the final conflict of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion.² The end result only demonstrates how important this turn is to Jesus. We know that these qualities of overarching pardon and forgiveness are completely essential to Christ because he ends up sacrificing everything in order to promote them. As a result, the call of Matthew and the turning point Matthew represents, while brief, become crucial to understanding Jesus’ character. They may even be enough alone to understand Jesus’ character.

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The lesson of Matthew is particularly apropos for the season of Lent. This is a season that begins with us focusing on our worldliness—our mortality and humanity. When we give things up for Lent, they nearly always begin with the physical, giving up meat or caffeine or chocolate. Sometimes they end there...but the call of Matthew shows us that this is not true to the ethos of Jesus. Jesus is first and foremost about more than the physical.

Likewise, there is an element to Lent that can end up more divisive than uniting. I’ve heard criticisms—usually from Christians—of worshipers who act like the ashes on their foreheads are badges of honor. I’ve read similar critiques about how giving something up can become a competition.³ But the point of Lent is not to one-up others with our piety or sacrifice. It is to become drawn together in our humanity and evanescence. It is to recognize that we are all in the same place, that we are all dust and ashes, that we are all here to receive the connection with God that Jesus makes possible.

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In 1965, Percy Sledge was laid off from his job as a construction worker and his girlfriend left him. He found new work as an orderly and sang at nights in a band called The Esquires Combo. One night in his grief, he asked the backing band to lay down a blues track while he belted out his sorrows. Out of that night came “When A Man Loves A Woman,” which led to a recording contract and a new life. Sledge rode that one song all the way to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. When he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2005, somewhat dubiously given that

² Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 8, 117.

³ Bierma, Nathan. “Five Reasons Not To Give Up Something For Lent.” 2009 March 5.

<https://thinkchristian.net/five-reasons-not-to-give-up-something-for-lent>. Accessed 2022 March 5.

his impact was limited primarily to the one song, I still felt a sense of excitement and pride for him.

Our turning points are small moments, but they have big results. They can attune us from the worldly to the sacred. They can open our world to a love bigger than what we are capable of. They can land us in hot water. But more than anything, they are the moments that help us—as well as others—understand our character. They make us who we are.