

It takes *faith* to do this, though. It takes *faith*, and it takes *strength*, and it takes *courage*. And, just like anything else we try that's new, it also takes *practice*.

When Julianna and Maya were small, when I was teaching them how to ride a bike, I had training wheels put on their bikes. So they rode around for awhile with their training wheels, and then, after they felt they had mastered the balance and stamina and other things required to ride a bike—after they'd reached this point, they asked to have the training wheels removed.

So the training wheels were taken off, and as I recall what came next required great effort—not so much on *their* part, but on *mine*. Because what came next required me to run alongside the bike with one hand on the seat, steadying it and—when necessary—providing a safety net when the bike threatened to tip over.

And then, one day, came the day when I *knew* they were ready to ride without me running alongside them, *without* my hand steadying the bike as they rode.

And so I ran alongside the bike, just like before ... only this time I only *pretended* to hold the bike. In reality, they were riding it themselves, because they were finally ready to ride solo.

That day when Jesus called Matthew to get up and follow him was the day that Matthew's training wheels were taken off his faith. It's the day when Jesus finally took his hand off the seat of Matthew's bike. It's the day when Jesus no longer followed alongside Matthew, but instead pulled out in front of him, urging him not to falter, but to just keep going—going wherever Jesus was running.

And Matthew did just that. Matthew kept riding, trusting that Jesus was running right there beside him. And that's just what Jesus was doing—running right there alongside Matthew, showing him where to go.

It's like that when Jesus calls us, too. We're first given the “training wheels” of faith, those tools we need to learn how to be people of faith, the spiritual disciplines of scripture, and prayer, and solitude, and silence. And we practice these things, and at first Jesus is right there with us, holding us up, as it were.

And then, one day, Jesus knows that we're ready—Jesus knows that we're ready, *finally*, to ride solo.

It is then—and *only* then—that Jesus finally takes his hand off the seat of our bikes. It's only *then* that we fly solo. It's only *then* that Jesus calls us—when Jesus judges us, *finally*, to be ready.

And it's only then—in faith, trusting that Jesus is still there with us, even if we can't feel his hand—it is then that we set aside what we're doing; we stand up; and we do what Jesus tells us do.

And it's only then—when we do that, when we faithfully answer Jesus' call, when we commit to going wherever Jesus wants us to go—it's *then* that we start to see some truly magical things happen. We see things like miracle healings, like the woman who touched just the fringe of Jesus' cloak, trusting—in *faith*—that Jesus would heal her. We see things like a little girl being raised from the dead, because her father—in *faith*—trusted Jesus to heal her.

It is then, in other words, that our “brokenness” is fixed. It is *then* that we're made whole.

This, then, is the connection between Matthew's call and the healing stories. They flow together because this is the essence of the gospel message. This is the essence of the good news of Jesus Christ—that when we follow Christ, we are healed. No matter how grievous our sins; no matter how imperfect we are as human beings; no matter how far we fall short of who we want to be—none of it matters. None of it at all.

Because when we follow Jesus—when we, in faith, commit to living lives of love—we are healed. Through grace, we are made whole.

That's what happened with Matthew, the tax man.

That's what happened to all his friends—all those scoundrels with whom Jesus had dinner with that night so long ago.

And that's what happens to *us*, as well. When we answer Jesus' call—when we choose to follow Christ—we are healed. Period. No questions asked. Our sins are forgiven, the slate's wiped clean. It doesn't matter that we're not perfect, because we're not expected to be perfect. Because perfect people don't need fixed. Perfect people don't need grace. Imperfection, in fact, is a necessary condition for receiving grace, because if we were perfect, we wouldn't need it.

Our God is a merciful God, a God who does not require of us perfection. We just have to be obedient. We just have to try.

Like Matthew, the tax man, we just have to follow Christ.

Thanks be to our God, who truly is a God of mercy.

Amen.

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“All in Good Time?”

Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 8, 2008



Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Last week, when I was looking over the lectionary passages for this week's sermon, I found myself pausing over the reading from Matthew, the one we just read, because it just didn't make sense to me. First there's this call story—Jesus calling Matthew, the tax collector—but then we shift gears and move right away to these two healing stories, where Jesus cures a hemorrhagic woman and then raises a little girl from the dead.

And I wondered—what's the connection here? What does dinner with a tax collector have to do with resurrection? Why is it that these two stories are linked together in the lectionary?

So I thought we could take a little time this morning to explore this connection, because as it happens, what I've learned is that these two stories, taken together, summarize in just a few short verses the entire Gospel of Matthew.

The reading starts out, of course, with Jesus calling Matthew, the tax collector. I love the call of Matthew, because of the circumstances surrounding Matthew's call. Because Matthew is called when he's in the middle of engaging in one of the most sinful practices of his day—tax collecting.

Matthew wasn't looking for God; in fact, as far as we know, given what we know of Matthew in terms of his chosen profession, Matthew really hadn't even *considered* God—hadn't factored God into his life plan at all. Matthew was not only not on the right path in life—the path that would lead him to God—he had veered so far off the path it seemed as though he would *never* find his way back. Because Matthew was a *tax collector*.

It is hard for us today to understand just how despised tax collectors were back in the first century AD, but the song, "Tax Man," that the Beatles wrote back in the 60s could have been written with Matthew in mind. Listen to some of the lyrics:

*If you drive a car—I'll tax the street;
If you try to sit—I'll tax your seat;
If you get too cold—I'll tax the heat;
If you take a walk—I'll tax your feet.*

You get the idea. The "tax man" of Jesus' time was a coldhearted, self-centered, selfish man who got rich at the expense of others. "Tax men" were universally reviled and hated. No one—*no one*—wanted anything to do with them.

Except, of course, Jesus. Jesus was not only willing to associate with Matthew, he went so far as to *call* Matthew—a *tax man*—to become one of Jesus' disciples. He called Matthew—a *tax man*—to follow him.

And Matthew gets up and does just that—he *follows* Jesus.

It's a remarkable story, is it not? That Jesus would call someone like *Matthew* to follow him? I think it's remarkable for a number of reasons, not only *that* Jesus called Matthew, but also, and maybe more importantly, *when* Jesus called Matthew.

Think about it. Jesus called Matthew long after he called the other disciples. He didn't call Matthew at the same time he called Peter, or Andrew, or James, or John. Why did he do that, do you suppose? Because Jesus needed to stop and consider the ramifications of calling such a blatant sinner? Because Jesus had to wait until he had more support, until he was more popular, to bear the criticism he knew he'd get? Because Jesus just hadn't met Matthew yet?

Fourth-century theologian and Bishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom, one of our early church fathers, had a different theory. He had a different theory as to why Jesus waited to call Matthew, and his theory was this: Jesus waited because he had to, but it wasn't because *Jesus* wasn't ready—it was because *Matthew* wasn't ready.

Jesus knew that Matthew wasn't ready for his call until *just that moment*. Matthew, perhaps, needed to see some of the miracles Jesus performed before he was ready to start his journey with God—he had to see Jesus calm the storm, he had to watch Jesus cast out demons into swine, he had to marvel at Jesus healing the paralytic before he could commit to Christ.

And Jesus knew this. Jesus knew that Matthew wasn't ready back when the other disciples were ready, so Jesus waited until that exact moment in time—that exact minute of that exact day—to call Matthew. He waited until Matthew was *ready* to be called.

If I had been Jesus, I doubt that I'd have picked that particular time to call Matthew. I think I might've waited until I saw Matthew express some sort of interest in God, maybe by praying, or worshiping God, or even just meditating on the meaning of life. I *know* I wouldn't have called Matthew while he was in the middle of collecting taxes, which would be, after all, what I'd have been calling him *from*.

But (thanks be to God)—I am not Jesus. Because Jesus knew better. Jesus knew that the absolute best time to call Matthew wasn't when he was engaged in doing good works. The best time to call him was when he *wasn't* doing good works—when he was, in fact, doing the exact *opposite* of good works.

Because Jesus knew that the best time to call Matthew was in the middle of Matthew's brokenness.

Jesus didn't wait until Matthew was "fixed" before he called him. Jesus called Matthew so that he *could* be "fixed," so that he

could be made whole, so that he *could* receive the grace that Jesus offered him. Jesus waited to call Matthew until that exact moment in time, when Jesus *knew* that he was ready.

Gives you hope for you and me, doesn't it? Because doesn't Jesus come to *us* when *we're* ready, too? Doesn't Jesus come to us while *we're* sinning and doing things wrong, too? Doesn't Jesus come to *us* in the middle of *our* brokenness?

Of course he does. Because that's what Jesus himself tells us he does—right there in that part where Jesus is having a little dinner party with not just *one* Tax Man—Matthew—but with a whole *group* of Tax Men, a dinner party which so scandalizes the Pharisees that they ask for an explanation.

"What are you *doing*?" they asked the disciples. "What are you *thinking*?" These men are not holy. These men are not sanctified. These men are not clean. Don't you realize that you'll be unclean, too, if you associate with them? Don't you see that you'll become just like them?"

So Jesus explains it to them. "Those who are well don't need a doctor," he tells the Pharisees. "It's those who are *sick* who need the doctor. It's those who are *broken* who need healed."

It's those, perhaps, who are just like you and me.

So Jesus reached out to them. He reached out to Matthew, he reached out to all the other tax collectors, and he reached out—*continues* to reach out, in fact—to you and to me.

And all we have to do to avail ourselves of this grace—all we have to do to be fixed, all we have to do to be relieved of our brokenness and be made whole—all we have to do is what Matthew did when Matthew heard Jesus call.

We have to stop what we're doing; we have to get up; and we have to follow Jesus—wherever he wants us to go.