First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

June 11, 2023

Is There a Doctor in the House?

Matthew 9:9-13 (NRSVUE)

**The Call of Matthew**

**9**As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, 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 Jesus and his disciples. **11**When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” **12**But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **13**Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

In these five short verses, we’re introduced to Matthew, the tax collector. As a side note here, in all likelihood, this Matthew isn’t the same Matthew who authored this account of Jesus’ life, as the Gospel of Matthew was written approximately 60 to 70 years after Christ. This reading also introduced to the concept of Jesus as the Great Physician and, by extension, the idea of the church being a hospital for sinners. If you’ve ever wondered where this particular theological idea came from, look no further, because you’ve found it.

But today, we’re going to talk about taxes and those tasked with collecting them. I’m certainly not a fan of having to pay taxes, and I’m pretty sure most, if not all, of you share that sentiment.

As much as we all dislike the idea of the government taking our hard earned money we, hopefully, understand that paying taxes means that our roads are paved, our public schools are somewhat adequately funded and our police forces have the resources needed to keep us safe, among all of the other vital services that help our society function smoothly. And while I don’t like paying taxes, I do like driving on well-maintained roads, I do like knowing that my nieces and nephews will receive an education, and I do like the fact that people like my brother-in-law are provided with what they need to keep us as safe as possible.

My dad worked for the IRS for 30 years, before he retired, and while it’s been 20 years since he left government service, he will take every single opportunity my siblings and I give him to relate horror stories about how he and his co-workers were treated as they went about their work. As difficult as my dad had it, the situation was much, much worse in Jesus’ day, not just for the everyday citizen, but for the tax collectors themselves.

During the Roman occupation, the tax burden imposed by the empire was crushing, to say the least. The people who lived in Roman occupied territories were forced to pay up to of 50% of their income, in various taxes, to Rome. And, just like today, the burden was largely bourn by those who could least afford it; the laborers, the farmers, the fishermen and those who tended sheep and cattle. And, much like today, the wealthy were able to get away with paying less taxes, or no taxes at all, in comparison to their less fortunate fellow citizens.

To make matters worse, tax collectors were always drawn from the local population and were not paid by Rome. In order for tax collectors to make a living for themselves, they had to resort to extorting additional money from their fellow citizens over and above what was due to Rome. Basically, they skimmed off the top and, in the process, had the opportunity to become very wealthy in their own right.

This brings us to Matthew, or Levi as he was known by his Hebrew name. He, along with his fellow tax collectors were some of the most hated people in Jewish society. Paying taxes to Rome was considered by many to be a sin, and those tasked with collecting taxes were viewed, at best, as men collaborating with a brutal occupying force. Not exactly the type of person you’d expect Jesus to associate with. But, then again, maybe Matthew *was* just the type of person we’d expect Jesus to hang with.

Jesus knew exactly who and what Matthew was. And, I don’t doubt, that given where this event falls in the narrative, Matthew had, at the very least, heard the stories of this preacher man from Galilee. So, when Jesus, by chance, passes by Matthew’s tax collection station and tells Matthew to follow him, he knew what he was doing. A question came up in Bible study, on Tuesday, as to why Matthew would simply get up and follow Jesus, without any regard to what he was giving up. I doubt that Matthew woke up that morning and said, “Hmm, I think today’s the day that I’ll just throw everything away, and start following that ragtag preacher guy from the sticks.” But that’s exactly how Matthew’s day turned out, so I have to believe that it was the Holy Spirit at work.

Later on, we find Jesus and his disciples having dinner at what we assume was Matthew’s house. Verse 10 tells us that, “… Many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples.” Apparently, some Pharisees were there too, which is interesting, because what the heck are Pharisees doing having dinner with a bunch of sinners and tax collectors? We don’t really know the answer to that particular question, but it seems to me that the question poised to the disciples in verse 11, “…Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”, could come off as hypocritical at best.

Jesus’ responses by saying that it’s sick folks who need a doctor, not those who are well. And he goes on to say that it’s mercy, not sacrifice, that he desires. It’s those words, mercy not sacrifice, that in my opinion, stand at the heart of this passage.

We often link the idea of mercy with repentance. And when we do, the formula tends to go like this; I repent of whatever sin I’ve committed, and only then am I’m offered the mercy of forgiveness. Even our liturgy is structured in such a way that each week we pray a prayer of confession and only afterwards, are we offered an assurance of God’s forgiveness.

I don’t necessarily have an issue with this formula but, after studying this passage a bit more, I wonder if there might be another way to approach the whole idea of mercy, forgiveness and grace.

It seems to me that Jesus, by the very act of reaching out to Matthew first, was forgiving Matthew before repentance entered the picture. In other words, Jesus flipped the formula around; Forgiveness *before* repentance. And Matthew responses by immediately following Jesus, which demonstrates his willingness to repent.

Jesus offered Matthew grace and in response to that proffered grace, in that moment of repentance, Matthew gives up everything. His wealth, probably his family, his ability to make a living, everything that, up to this point, had any meaning in his life. He gave it all up to follow Jesus. Matthew, in receiving the grace offered by Jesus, was compelled by that grace to follow Jesus, at the expense of everything his old life had to offer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who lived in Nazi Germany, referred to this as “costly grace”. Bonhoeffer defines costly grace this way. “Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow Him; it is grace because Jesus says: My yoke is easy and My burden light.”

Bonhoeffer was publicly critical of the Nazis and their takeover of the Christian Church in Germany. He was ultimately executed for choosing to follow Jesus’ teaching rather than submitting to the evil that surrounded him.

So, what are we willing to give up to follow Jesus? Are we willing to give up outdated ideas about race or sexuality, which only serves to create an “us versus them” paradigm? Are we willing to give up the outdated idea that we have dominion over the earth and aren’t responsible for its care, when all around us we see the impact of environmental neglect? Are we willing to give up on the outdated idea that some followers of Christ Jesus are better than others, which has caused so many wars and cost so many lives? Are we willing to give up our very life, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did? What cost, exactly, are we willing to bear to follow Jesus?

Let me be very clear; of course, we have a choice. We can certainly reject the grace, mercy and forgiveness that God, through Jesus Christ, offers each of us. That’s a choice each and every one of us gets to make. That’s called free-will. Matthew certainly didn’t have to accept the cost of forgiveness that Jesus offered. He could have just as easily said, “Nope, not gonna pay that price.” But he because he was offered forgiveness, he was *compelled* to accept the cost, and did so without question. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could have gone along with the evils of Nazism, as so many within the German church did, and refuse to submit an pay the price of following Jesus. Instead, Bonhoeffer chose to pay that price with his very life.

So, I’ll ask you this, are we truly followers of the risen Christ, if we aren’t willing to pay the price of letting go of our biases, our prejudices, and our old cherished ways of thinking and acting? Do we really get to call ourselves Christians, if we refuse to accept the easy yoke and light burden that grace offers us?

Here’s the thing; God knows exactly who we are and, in spite of that, God still offers us grace and mercy even when we stubbornly adhere to thoughts words and deeds which cause harm to ourselves and others. The formula has been flipped around and forgiveness is ours for the taking, if only we are willing to pay the cost.

The choice is pretty clear. Are we going to allow ourselves to remain sick, by continuing to engage in behaviors that separate us from God, or are we going to accept the healing freely offered by the Great Physician? Free-will means that each of us gets to make that choice for ourselves. Choose wisely, my friends. AMEN