

Message:
The Mission of Jesus...Then and Now”
(Prepared by the Rev. Grant Johnston)

In our story for today, from the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that as Jesus is walking along with his disciples, he comes upon a tax-collector named Matthew. He says to Matthew, “Follow me.” Immediately, Matthew leaves his job as a tax-collector, to follow Jesus. Matthew is his Greek name, but he is also known by Levi, his Hebrew name.

Most people don't like tax collectors. In fact, in Jesus' time tax collectors were despised. They collected taxes for the Roman government. The people of Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem, lived under the Roman occupation. Rome had soldiers stationed throughout the land to maintain control.

The people hated this Roman occupation. They hoped and prayed that one day God would send a Messiah, a delivering ruler, to liberate them from this foreign invader. To make matters worse, taxes were collected from the people to pay the soldiers' salaries. And often, it was their own people, fellow Jews, who collected these taxes, and so they were seen as traitors. However, the pay was good! Often, tax-collectors became very rich.

So, for Jesus to call Matthew, a tax-collector, to follow him, to join his group, well, that doesn't go over well, with just about everyone.

Jesus calls Matthew to follow him. What might this mean for Matthew?

Well, first of all, for Matthew, it means leaving his good paying job. He is not the only disciple to do so. Peter, and his brother Andrew, leave their fishing business. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also leave the family fishing business. And now we have Matthew, leaving his job, collecting taxes.

But leaving a job is not all it means for Matthew, when he agrees to follow Jesus. For Matthew and the other disciples too, it means travelling with Jesus throughout Galilee, Samaria and Judea, and maybe a couple of side trips to some other places

too. All this, before heading to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be rejected, condemned, and put to death.

The disciples are going to travel with Jesus, and watch him heal the sick, forgive sins, baptize with the Holy Spirit, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead. And they are going to listen to Jesus teach and preach.

The disciples are going to be his witnesses so they could tell others what they have seen Jesus do and share what Jesus teaches and preaches.

But what about us? Suppose you hear Jesus say to you, “Follow me,” and you decide to get serious about following. What might this mean for you?

Today, we follow Jesus, by reading and studying the Gospel of Matthew, or one of the other Gospels: Mark, Luke or John. This is how we learn from Jesus today. This is how we get to see again and again, what Jesus said and did, and what he continues to say and do, and will continue to say and do, until he has finished his work.

It can't be over-emphasized, the importance of reading, and studying, and hearing, the Gospels again and again and again. This is the only way we can be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Mission awareness begins with a thorough knowledge of one of the Gospels. This is the primary work of the church, to make this story of Jesus heard.

After Matthew agrees to follow Jesus, we are told that there is a meal in Matthew's house. Matthew invites Jesus and his disciples. So far in Matthew's Gospel, this means Peter, Andrew, James and John. Matthew also invites some friends and colleagues to the dinner. Now we have several tax-collectors gathered around Jesus, outcasts, sinners!

Is this not interesting? Jesus calls Matthew to follow him and Matthew agrees. He leaves his tax-collecting job. And the next thing that takes place is a meal, a dinner! What do you make of this?

Someone decides to become a Christian, someone who has heard Jesus say, "Follow me." They are so pleased that Jesus actually calls them to join his group, that they decide to celebrate with a meal, and invite their friends that they might meet Jesus too!

That's what Matthew does. And he does this because he is so surprised, so astonished, that Jesus would call the likes of him, a despised tax-collector, to join his group. So, he decides to provide a meal, and invite his friends, that they might meet Jesus too!

But what about us? Are we not surprised, are we not astonished, that Jesus would call the likes of us, to join his group and to follow him?

We should be surprised! Might we see ourselves as just as undeserving for Jesus to have called us to follow him, as Matthew was!

But what if we are to take this story seriously? What can we learn from it about the mission of Jesus and our mission too?

Is it not clear from Jesus calling Matthew to follow him, that the mission of Jesus then, and now, is to call people to gather around Jesus, to learn from, and be helped by him?

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew to follow him. Jesus calls James and John to follow him. And Jesus calls Matthew to follow him. "And soon a large number of tax-collectors and other outcasts was following Jesus, and many of them joined him and his disciples at the table." (Mark 2:15, GNT)

We learn from this story, Jesus calling Matthew to follow him, that the mission of Jesus is to gather men, women and children around him, to receive his guidance, his kindness, and his healing mercy. And our scripture lesson even gives us a suggestion on how we might do it. Provide a meal and read stories from the Gospel of Matthew, or one of the other Gospels, to the invited guests!

Churches have done this and maybe yours has as well!

A couple of examples... St. Andrew's Church in Inverness, Quebec did this for many years on Easter Sunday morning. St. Andrew's Church is a small English-speaking Presbyterian and United Church congregation, surrounded by a much larger French speaking community. On Easter Sunday morning, before the worship service, the folks at St. Andrew's Church hosted a breakfast of pancakes, sausages and real maple syrup!

This significantly increased the attendance on Easter Sunday morning, and not just with English speaking people, but with their French speaking neighbours as well!

That's what we saw taking place in our scripture lesson.

In another congregation, the folks organized a Friday night program that included a meal of pizza, pop and hot dinner dishes. The meal was served at 6:00 o'clock. After the meal, in the sanctuary, favorite songs were sung, and passages from the Gospel of Mark were read. The program ran for five Friday nights, until the Gospel of Mark had been read from beginning to end, by readers who practiced their readings beforehand.

That's what we saw taking place in our scripture lesson. People being introduced to Jesus. When food was provided, the greater the attendance. The greater the success.

Introduce folks to Jesus by providing a meal. Maybe this is something your Church or your AMS group could do. If you do, you would only be doing something that

the disciple Matthew did, long ago. And many came and joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. Amen.

Prayer Following Message:

Almighty God,

We can only thank and praise you for the kindness and mercy that we have received from your most blessed and dear Son, Jesus Christ, because that kindness and mercy is none other than your kindness and mercy that you have prepared for us in him.

Help us to appreciate this, that this kindness and mercy has come to us, the undeserving. Open our eyes to see this, that we might fully appreciate your undeserved love for us. And help us to be imaginative and creative in finding ways to let our friends and neighbours know that you hold out that same kindness and mercy to them too. Amen.

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