



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“The Unlikely Apostle”
Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 11, 2023
Matthew 9:9-13

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Our Lord had been in Capernaum, his adopted hometown, where he had healed the paralyzed man because of the faith of his friends. Today's Gospel reading speaks to two other well-known healing miracles: the raising of the daughter of a synagogue leader and the healing of the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. In the rest of this chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus opened the eyes of two blind men because they had faith that he could do that.¹ Then he healed a mute demoniac, a healing such as no one had ever seen before.² Jesus then “went about the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, and curing every disease and every sickness.”³

I want to suggest that the calling of the tax collector named Matthew was also a healing, more difficult than the young girl who was “sleeping” or the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years.⁴ Now in the first century, sleeping was a euphemism for dying. The child's father had such faith that Jesus could heal her when he knelt before Jesus and begged him to just come and lay his hand on his baby girl and she would live. We know though from the text that the professional mourners were already at the Jewish leader's home (playing their flutes that sounded not like music girls might have danced to, but funeral dirges, and praying loudly as they always did), so clearly the girl was dead. Jesus put the mourners outside and merely touched the girl's hand, and she got up. Remember that touching a dead person was forbidden, for one would become ritually unclean. And the poor woman who had been hemorrhaging for more than a decade took such a risk, but she left the red tent where women were supposed to stay when they were unclean each month and for purification after the birth of their babies. So desperate was this suffering woman that she ventured out into society, keeping well towards the ground

out of sight of respectable people, with the feign hope of seeing the renown healer, even touching the fringe of his cloak. And Jesus healed her because of her faith.

In the first century all illnesses, no matter their severity, were thought to be caused by sin. Do not think of this belief as unsophisticated just because we have the benefit of modern medical science to purportedly explain every ailment. First century people relied on their belief systems to explain illness and uncleanness and many normal phenomena that we take for granted. First century people suffered twice when they were ill: first with the symptoms of leprosy, fever, blindness, paralysis, bleeding, inability to see or hear or speak, epilepsy, and every known ailment. And then there was the social aspect that their illness caused, which was just as devastating or more so as their symptoms. Every person who was ill also suffered isolation, because they often were considered unclean. They were outcasts and were required to keep others at a distance.⁵ And all of these were caused by the sin of the afflicted person (or their parents or relatives, if the ill person was very young). So Jewish laws defined other classes of people who were sinners and therefore ritually unclean. Here is a not-so-exhaustive list: ass drivers, camel drivers, sailors, and casters (which could be those who cast spells and incantations or those who cast the stones to divine the will of God, which seems unlikely, but casters whoever they might have been). Others added to the list of sinners who were unclean were: physicians (because they were blood-letters), butchers, tanners, bath attendants, and the dreaded and despised tax collectors. And by definition in the expansion of the Jewish rules in their Mishna, surely Matthew was a sinner and unclean. Yes, everyone hated tax collectors, but the Jews hated them more than any other in part because they were staunch nationalists. To the Jews, God was the only king, and to pay taxes to a mortal ruler was against the rights of God and an insult to God. So by law a tax collector could not enter the synagogue. A tax collector could not be a witness in any case before the Jewish courts. They were lumped into the same class as robbers and murderers. And Jesus was often seen with tax collectors and other sinners.

And this takes us back to the dinner table in Capernaum. Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. And he shared meals with them. Yes, tax collectors were morally suspect. They contracted with the occupying power – the Roman authorities, in Matthew’s case with Herod – to collect the taxes. And, yes, many tax collectors practiced extortion. Jesus gathered the people around the dinner table as he often had done. It might have been Jesus’ house or the home where he was staying.⁶ Or it could have been at Matthew’s home in Capernaum.

Capernaum was a meeting place of many roads. The great road from Egypt to Damascus (called the Way of the Sea) passed right through Capernaum. It is next to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Galilee in northern Israel. It was a garrison town, an administrative center, and a customs station. (It is called Kfar Nahum today, or in Arabic Talhum.)⁷ Matthew must have been one of those customs officers who exacted duty on all goods and commodities as they entered and left the territory of Herod.

Surely Matthew had heard of this young Galilean who spoke so beautifully with authority and moreover with a new vision for God’s people. In my sanctified imagination, I see Matthew at the edge of the gathering of what seemed like rather unorthodox crowd, listening ever hopeful that he might find a reason to live a new and better life. He wondered, was it too late to leave his old life behind, to let go of his shame and start anew – hit the restart button we might say? Or do a mulligan as our parents might call it? When Matthew saw Jesus standing in front of him and heard his invitation: Come to dinner, and let’s talk. Let’s talk about your being a disciple, an apostle to share the good news of the kingdom of God. At first he was speechless, but then Matthew accepted. Jesus issued him a challenge, he left all behind and followed Jesus.

Imagine with me what Matthew had given up, what he lost but also what he found. He lost a job, but gained his destiny. He lost a good income, a known security, but found honor. Yes, he became poorer in things, but when he let go of “worldly ambitions” what an adventure he found! And he found peace and joy.⁸ One of our favorite Biblical

scholars, William Barklay, muses that Matthew did take one thing with him when he left his tax collector's table in Capernaum. He took his pen with him. Likely none of the fishermen that Jesus had called to be disciples were very skilled with a pen. They probably were not very good at writing and putting words together. But Matthew had those skills.⁹ My friends, here is an example of Jesus using whatever gifts we may bring. Your priest, Jim has the gift of writing clearly and succinctly and with beauty. Some among us have the skill to organize. Some have HR skills. Some have the gift of music. Some have an extraordinary love of all people. Some have computer skills. Some have the gift of hospitality. Some love to cook. Some have the gift of truly listening, of being totally present with another person. Some give us beautifully clean linens for the altar. Some put everything in order for our services so that we are freed to just come and worship. Some attend to the needs of the priest – and God bless them! Some work flowers into art. I could go on and on. But the Lord uses our gifts large and small. And he also calls us to develop new gifts to further the kingdom.

Now, there had to have been Pharisees in the crowd too. And they asked the disciples why their teacher ate with tax collectors and sinners. The answer is obvious to us, because we have experienced Jesus's call to each of us. We know that we all are sinners. And we know that Jesus came for those who needed saving from their own sins. And we know that we can be healed by the grace of God. We may not be healed in the way we want but in the way we need.

To Jesus, tax collectors must have been one of those who most needed healing. Jesus had the power to see the good in all people. He saw not only who Matthew the tax collector was but who he could be. We might think, what an unlikely person Matthew was to become an Apostle of our Lord! And we would be right. But we are not Jesus! No one ever had such faith in the possibilities of human nature as Jesus had. And he still does!

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ See Matthew 9: 27-29.

² See Matthew 9: 32-33.

³ See Matthew 9: 35.

⁴ I credit Biblical scholar Sarah Dylan Breuer for part of this through process, as found in a sentence in Bishop Any Doyle's thoughts on Matthew 9:-13 on his blogspot <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/>.

⁵ Michael Ewart's blog holy textures.com refers in part to Rene Girard's *Process Theology*, and her musings on class and feminism. See <https://www.holytextures.com/2011/05/matthew-9-9-13-18-26-year-a-pentecost-june-5-june-11-proper-5-ordinary-10-sermon.html>.

⁶ Or the meal could have been in the house of Matthew as the narrative in the Gospel according to Luke explains. It could have been Matthew's or Levi's home as the story goes in the other synoptic gospels. (See Matthew 9:10-13, Mark 2:14-17, and Luke 5:27-32).

⁷ Thank you, Dr. Google. There is a rare English word capharnaum that means "a place with a disorderly accumulation of objects" and is derived from the town's name.

⁸ As I often so, I rely on the expert commentary of William Barclay, this week on Matthew 9. See <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-9.html>.

⁹ It is thought that Matthew composed the first handbook of the teaching of Jesus, which must rank as one of the most important books ever written. Barklay clearly must be referring to *The Didache*. Didache means "The Teaching." Christian tradition has claimed that the Didache is nothing less than the teaching of the Twelve Apostles to the early-Church. It predates even the oldest writing in the New Testament, that is the Epistles of Paul. It is thought that Matthew and Luke drew on the text of the Didache for their Gospels. It was not discovered until 1873 in the Library of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople and published in Greek ten years later, the Didache was immediately seen to be one of the most important literary remains of early Christianity outside of the New Testament. I have a translated copy in the office if you would like to take a look.