

Pastor Jon's Sermon from June 11, 2023 based on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

“God never calls us **to** something, without first calling us **away from** something.”

What are you being called away from? What are you being called to?

Take Matthew the tax collector, for example, in our Gospel for today. He is sitting at his tax booth minding his own business when Jesus walks up to him and says, “Follow me”. And he, like the fisherman before, dropped what he was doing and followed Jesus.

The concept of a tax collector in Jesus' time reminds me of our trip to New Jersey to watch Eli Row this past week. We traveled on tollways and turnpikes to get there. We met Annika in New Jersey and took her into New York City one night to see some friends. We also wanted Marcella to see the statue of Liberty... because she loves the replica in Neenah. We went through tunnels in New York City and over bridges. But each time you enter one... I found out... you have to pay.

One of the best things I have ever done, travel-wise, was to buy an EZ Pass transmitter to put on your windshield. It registers all the tolls and charges them to your account. It is like a credit card for your car. You don't know what the damage is until you see your statement. However, it is a joy when that arm goes up as you inch through the booth... as others wait to pay. Just our little drive into New York city cost us at least \$100, because if you go through a tunnel, then miss a turn, then accidentally go through the tunnel again, you get charged every time to the tune of \$15 to \$20. Bridges are the same thing. It is highway robbery.

Tax-collectors in Jesus' time were despised for they were often believed to cheat the people whose taxes they were collecting. They would often sit on busy roadways or bridges to collect on behalf of the Roman Empire. They would bid on route or bridge and pay the Roman Empire up front for the right to collect taxes there. Anything above and beyond what they paid would be profit. They were considered to be no better than swindlers and murderers.

First of all, what is Jesus up to calling a tax collector to be one of his disciples? And second, why does Jesus have so much grace for sinners? Matthew the tax collector wasn't looking to follow Jesus. Jesus commanded him to walk away from a dishonest life into a new life with Jesus that was yet unknown.

The second vignette of the text has Jesus publicly eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees saw this and were disturbed that Jesus was eating with such people. Jesus overheard the conversation and responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.

In other words, one of the pre-requisites of being a disciple of Jesus is to acknowledge that you are a sinner in need of God's grace. Apparently the Pharisees didn't see themselves as sinners like those other people... and they felt they were above others in the righteousness category. No one is above another when it comes to our condition of sin.

Then during the meal, a leader of the synagogue came in a kneeled at Jesus' feet begging him to come and raise his daughter who died. The rulers of the synagogue weren't always receptive to Jesus. But when called on, Jesus went away from the meal with a grieving father.

Jesus went with his disciples. Then on the way, an unclean woman came up and touched Jesus' cloak, believing she would be healed from a 12 year long menstrual period. Jesus turned around, saw who it was, and called her a daughter... a term of endearment... your faith has made you well.

Finally, Jesus entered the house of the leader of the synagogue, went where his dead daughter lay. She was dead. There where flute players and hired mourners gathering around the house. It was a funeral. Jesus went in and grabbed her by the hand and raised her from the dead.

Jesus is breaking all kinds of boundaries in this text. Calling public sinners to follow, eating with them, leaving a meal to help a desparate father, being touched by an unclean woman in a crowd, and grabbing a dead girl by the hand. Jesus wasn't afraid to see everyone, regardless of their past or social state, as someone deserving wholeness and a place in his kingdom.

What can this text teach us today? What can Jesus' grace for outsiders and his willingness to not view people as interruptions or distractions move us toward? Jesus cast of moral and social outcasts describes God's inclusive mercy in his kingdom.

We live in a world sharply divided over things like Bud light. Pastor Lori Bankowski in the Devotion God Pause this week reflects on our Gospel this way, "There are plenty of "others" in our world today—the homeless in our cities, the single people, the LGBTQ+ folks among us, the elderly, to suggest a few—we know who they are in our lives. Jesus reminds us that all of these people, including us, are the ones he came to save.

All of these stories point to the cross and the resurrection. Jesus will know what it is like to be an outcast. Jesus will suffer, bleed, and die. He will be raised from the dead. But in all of that, Jesus says our faith will save us.