

Pastor T.C. Arnold
St. Matthew Day
Matthew 9:9-13
September 21st, 2014

In the news these days we hear all about ISIS or ISIL and the threat of the Islamic State on Christians in Northern Iraq, in other places in the Middle East, in Europe, and even the warning from our Arab allies that if gone unchecked, they could be a threat to the United States. For many it seems surprising that there would be a group of people that wish to see others dead because they don't agree with their teachings about faith and their fundamental ideas about governance under the Sharia law of the Koran. However, they are saying the threat grows as those who wish to join this group grows. Just a few days ago a British aid worker was murdered and the terrible images were transmitted around the world. It's so hard to understand this... especially in this culture of acceptance of those who are different from us that you and I have only known. They don't accept what is different. For them, it is literally, convert to what we believe or die.

Today, in the midst of the craziness of this world, we pause to celebrate what is called St. Matthew Apostle and Evangelist Day. Apostle, because he followed the Lord and Evangelist because he was called to bring the people to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is an open book – and open message of life and salvation for the nations. The Gospel does the work of conversion through the Holy Spirit placed upon the hearts of man – not an axe or sword at the throat. The Gospel made flesh – that is, Jesus Himself, walked toward Matthew, a wretched tax collector sitting in his booth, and called out two simple words, “Follow me.” And by the power of the Gospel, not the sword, he did. Not only did Jesus invite the most wretched to be a part of “His crew,” but he also made it a point to breach the doorposts of wretched men, recline at their table, have an intimate meal with them (entering someone's house and eating with them was the highest form of fellowship) and show what kind of Rabbi He was. And most of all, this St. Matthew Day, shows us how Jesus approaches those who do not follow Him – much different than what we see in the news.

Take a look at St. Matthew for just a moment. Look at what kind of man Jesus called to follow Him in the Gospel text for today. He was a tax collector in Galilee which means that he worked for Rome under the supervision of Herod Antipas. His booth where Jesus met him was probably between the territories of Philip and Antipas where commercial tolls were levied. Tax collectors were prone to lying, cheating and stealing. Matthew was most likely no different. How did tax collectors cheat?

Under the overall Roman system, individual tax collectors would bid on the right to collect indirect taxes in a certain region or town. The Romans (or the local ruler, such as Herod Antipas) would award the contract to collect the taxes from the people to the highest bidder, who then would seek to recover the money that he had already paid as best he could. Such a system was set up to tempt the tax collector to gather more than was required. He was trying to fill his own pockets, you see, and not the pockets of Rome. Tax collectors were known to abuse their office and indulge in greed.

This brings us back to Matthew who was one of these men. He, for sure had a “wretched” vocation and, I'm sure, Matthew was thought of as a wretched man. Not only did he work for the enemy (Rome), he was also a Jew. The only thing worse than someone who works for the Romans, is a “traitor Jew” who works for the Romans. But yet it was a man like Matthew that Jesus didn't approach to say, “Convert or die,” but rather called and even sat at his table in his home to eat.

We hear the Pharisees putting up a big fuss over this in the text when they asked the disciples of Jesus, “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” The Pharisees

were more in the camp of, “Convert or die” in their attitude of righteousness above others and how their way of keeping the law is better than any kind of God’s mercy to save sinners. But this banquet at the house of Matthew was His opportunity to call to faith people who were conscious of their unrighteousness. You see, Jesus sits with them, not because they are worthy, but because He is merciful. And, beloved in the Lord, this is the God we rely on today – a merciful God who calls sinners, of whom we are the worst.

That’s right, we are the worst sinners – worse than that lying tax collector called Matthew. I call you that, as I call myself that for a particular reason. We, at times, take comfort in a text like this for the wrong reason. We take a man like Matthew and think he is worse than me, at least I’m not that bad. We may even think this same thing about our neighbors and our friends who we know have done some terrible things. And it makes us feel better about the terrible things that we have thought, spoken and done. We gain comfort from the sins of others as we think to ourselves, “I’m not that bad, I can continue in what I’m doing, even if it is a sin, because others are worse than me. I’m only cheating a little. I’m only lying a little. As long as I keep it at a certain level, I’m okay. I’m not cheating as much as my neighbor – or as much as Matthew – and look at him. We call him St. Matthew today. By virtue of comparison, I’m doing pretty well.”

Now, it might be helpful to look at a man like Matthew and think, “If Jesus can be merciful to him, He can be merciful to me as well.” Yes, that can be helpful – because it’s true. There is no sin in this world our Lord cannot forgive. But if we take comfort because someone else’s sins are worse than ours, then that will often lead us to continue with our own perceived “not-so-bad” sins instead of to repentance – a turning away from our sin.

Hear, again, what this text is about. Jesus calls to faith people who are conscious of their unrighteousness. Jesus doesn’t eat with Matthew because Matthew is worthy to have Jesus at his house and reclining at his table. No, rather, Jesus eats with Matthew because Jesus is merciful.

It’s the desire of Jesus to give the sick what they need because they are the ones who need it. That’s the Savior’s mercy. We are sin-sick and we need Jesus. No doubt there are those who believe they need no doctor. Those are the Pharisees in our midst. They don’t believe mercy is the way to the good health of life eternal. They believe that judgment is the way. They are not happy having sinners in their neighborhood. So, convert or die, they say.

But this place is not that place. This place is a place for sinners because our Savior Jesus comes to dine with us in a most intimate way. The feast for today includes His body and blood in every sip and morsel. Making those who are sick well again is an underserved kind of love and also the true religion. So, if it means having that difficult talk, taking on that extra big project at work, confronting the boss, having the difficult conversation with our kids, we can count on having a Jesus that looks upon the unrighteousness in merciful ways – a way that shows us that He is with us at our house – at our table – like Matthew.

Beloved, the comfort for us today is that Jesus wants sinners to be a part of His kingdom. He walks through your door, sits at your table, calls you His very own in mercy – not in your righteousness – because He knows, we have our days of weakness, fear, anxiety. How can we be righteous? We are not – not without our Jesus who enters our lives who says, “I’m here. I love you and I will not leave you. You have strength because of my righteousness. You have life and salvation because I have lived righteousness for you – died for you – and now you live.” May God richly bless you and keep you. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.