Mercy All Around Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

 2 Pentecost, June 11, 2023

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[[Friends in Christ - I would like to take a moment to address you in a personal manner with some introductory remarks…

I am Pastor Phil Wold, and I serve Trinity Lutheran Church in Sheridan, Wyoming. (Yes, we are part of the Montana Synod).

I volunteered to prepare a sermon for you for today because June 11 is our daughter’s 25th birthday. I mention this because she came to our family through adoption, through Lutheran Social Service of Montana (Now St. John’s United Family Services).

Why “thank you” to you and your congregation? Through your giving to the Montana Synod, you provided important support to LSS Montana, and so I am grateful to you, for the most amazing gifts of our lives - the gift of our two children.

Thank you, thank you.

There is a nice line by E. Stanley Jones -

“Every person who belongs to Christ, belongs to every person who belongs to Christ.”

How true.

My belonging to you and the Montana Synod shapes every day of our lives in profound ways. Once again; thank you for the amazing ways you have impacted my family!

And now, on to a reflection on Matthew 9 and Jesus’ call of Matthew, and Jesus’ call of you as well]]

MERCY ALL AROUND Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

     “Follow me.” It is as simple as that. Jesus called Matthew to follow, and Jesus has called you to follow as well. God has washed over you with water and the Word, shaped and formed you into the person you are today. Having called you, Jesus Christ has sent you to bear God’s creative and redeeming love to all whom you can. This is a gift of God’s doing, and you are a beloved receiver of God’s grace and favor, forgiveness and life.

     “Follow me” Jesus says. And if you look closely, you will see there are not any extra requirements here. Matthew is not required to believe the right way. Matthew is not asked to pass any test. The call requires only that Matthew be Matthew. Be Matthew, and follow. Matthew is to bring his own sorry tax-collecting self along, and that’s it.

     You know where this is going, don’t you? Jesus has the same requirements for you. Well, not quite the same. You are not expected to be Matthew. You are called to be you, and to bring your own - dare one say ‘sorry self’? - and follow. This much is certain. Jesus has called you, and while you - or some who know you best - might wonder if Jesus has made a wise decision in calling you, Jesus, apparently, has no such concerns.

 There is a wonderful line by evangelist Luis Pulau, who said:

“God is not disillusioned with us.

He never had any illusions in the first place.”

     And so, today we hear from the 9th chapter of Matthew, where Matthew responds to Jesus’ call by leaving everything to follow. Did you know that we don’t hear from Matthew again? Other than being included in the lists of the twelve Disciples in Matthew chapter 10 and in Luke 6 and Mark 3, this is all we know about Matthew in the entire New Testament.

“As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth;

and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.”

There is a lesson here for each and every disciple. Jesus is the interesting one, and you might want to keep your eyes on him.

     Now, we might well assume that Matthew is the host of the meal that we are told about in the next verses… The banquet where “many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with [Jesus] and his disciples…”

     This meal that Jesus shares with Matthew and other tax collectors and sinners sets the religious leaders off in their self-righteousness. They are sure that Jesus should be more careful with the gifts of God. They are certain that God would not accept such questionable people, and they’re afraid that Jesus might try to count his dinner companions  among God’s elect. They are concerned for Jesus’ reputation and by association they are concerned about the reputation of God, our creator and the author of all righteousness.

     And what does Jesus have to say in response to their skepticism about his banquet partners? He says:

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

     Mercy and not sacrifice.

     While the religious authorities are sure that righteousness must be established and observed by all, in matters of discipleship, Jesus shows that mercy is the heart of the matter.

     So often we make the mistake of thinking that our walk with God is a matter of our own accomplishment, something that grows out of our being right about God and Jesus… And this assumption about ourselves is much like the view of the religious authorities, who looked at Jesus’ dinner companions, and wondered how Jesus could possibly eat with them…

     Yet mercy is key from the very start. It is the mercy of God that makes you God’s own. Washed and renewed, you are a child of God by the grace and mercy of the one who forgives sinners and welcomes them, renews you and send you out for the healing of the world…

Dr. Gerhard Forde, [pronounced ferr-dee]  sainted theology professor of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, was a marvelous proclaimer and teacher of the grace of God in Christ. He had a biting sense of humor, and an abiding understanding of how God has given Jesus to make you God’s own child, as a gift of God’s unending grace.

     Dr. Forde would tell his students to be careful with concepts like disciple-ship and steward-ship. These words that end “ship” - can cause us to become preoccupied with our selves, and to make the mistake of taking our eyes off of Jesus. Yes, you are called to be good stewards of the gifts God has given you. Yes, you are called to live your life as one redeemed by God through Jesus Christ. Yes, your discipleship is an important gift to your community. But spending much time waxing poetic about these “ships” might be a bit like staring at the sun. You might well be blinded to what matters most.

     Not only that, often, when we focus on discipleship we join the Pharisees in emphasizing righteousness to the exclusion of mercy.

     Recognizing that talk of discipleship leads us up a shaky ladder, here goes…

 Years ago, theologian Stanley Hauerwas published an essay on discipleship in which he compared discipleship to Jesus with learning the craft of being a bricklayer like his father. To learn masonry, he needed to be apprenticed to a master craftsman… There were myriad things to understand, including terminology, and types of bricks, as well as the techniques for laying mortar and stacking the bricks. In the end, you learn by doing.

     For you - for all of God’s people in Christ, the craft of discipleship is learned by doing. Gathering for worship, learning the vocabulary of the faith, praying together as our Lord taught us, reaching out your hand and receiving the gift of Christ’s body and blood in the bread and wine, broken and poured out for you. We are shaped as disciples and followers of Jesus by together hearing God’s word of mercy and life, confessing our sins, hearing the Great Good News of God’s forgiveness and becoming a part of God’s story through Jesus Christ. We learn to follow by following…

     In a surprising turn in his reflection on discipleship, Dr. Hauerwas suggests that we must be trained to be sinners.

Yes.

     If we do not know the Good News of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we will remain caught up in the project of self-justification. We cannot own and admit to our brokenness until we know the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ that forgives and redeems the broken. . .

     Gathering for worship and confessing our sin forms us as followers of Jesus. Knowing your need for mercy, and confessing your sin, you have learned to turn to God for the forgiveness of sin that grants life and salvation.

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

     The mercy that Jesus has in store for the world is a gift that is only available to sinners. While it may be discouraging to note that you will always be a sinner, there is Good News at hand, for your status as a sinner is accompanied by Jesus’ great desire to include sinners in the community of Christ, so that they might be sent out as forgiven and renewed members of God’s kingdom.

     And here we see that it is God’s  great mercy toward you that calls for you - - and for the disciples - - and for the Pharisees - to regard all others with mercy and love.

 In our Gospel reading today, the story develops in an interesting way. Jesus went forth from this banquet table, to work the mercy he asks us all to share.  The healing for the woman who touched the fringe of his cloak, and the life Jesus brought to the man’s daughter is his gift of mercy for you and for all the world.

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

     What a marvelous assignment Jesus has given, that we might go and learn what God’s mercy means for our lives. In part, what this means is that you will give gifts that shape families in ways far beyond your understanding. The meaning of God’s mercy shapes this congregation, shapes our Montana Synod, bears forgiveness to God’s people, and sends us out to bear God’s healing wherever we can. May you bear this mercy well. AMEN

p.s. I would really like to hear from you if you were able to use this sermon today.

Please email me with a hello - philwold@gmail.com

- no pressure, if you don’t, that’s ok, it would just be nice to connect.

Peace to you, you are in my prayers, Phil Wold