

## Matthew 9:9-13

Pentecost 3; June 11 & 12, 2023

Some of you may know the story about a man named John Newton. When John was only 7 years old, his mother died while living in England. School wasn't for him. At the age of 11, he began his life as a seaman with his father. As he got older, he would become a captain of a slave ship. Needless to say, the capturing, selling and transporting black slaves to the plantations in the West Indies and America was a cruel and vicious way of life. Everyone feared and hated John. His life had become a complete mess. He began to not like the man he had become. One day when his ship had been in open sea, a terrible storm erupted. For two days, they battled this storm. In desperation, he cried out to God for help. They made it through the storm.

When he arrived back in England, John became a changed man. He gave up his sea life to become a preacher. He would eventually write a hymn that began as an autobiography of his life. The hymn he would write would become known as the hymn, "Amazing Grace." Yet, even though he became a powerful preacher, he never forgot his past. On his gravestone he wrote: *"Once an infidel and libertine a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our LORD and SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."*

John Newton was not the only one who never forgot their past. He is in good company with a numerous number of people in the Bible. Moses failed in his attempt to lead Israel when he was young even though he was willing to kill for it. He knew the court of the world's only super power (Egypt) would kill him if he was caught for killing an Egyptian task master. So, he ran off into exile for 40 years in the wilderness. When God called Moses from a burning bush to rescue the children of Israel from Egypt, he said: **"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"** He never forgot his past.

Paul never forgot how he had been an enemy of Christ and had tried to destroy the Christian Church. He had personally nearly shutdown the Christian Church in Jerusalem, reducing it from tens of thousands to a small handful of believers. Later, after becoming an apostle, he would describe himself as: **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."** He couldn't believe that God had shown him mercy. It was hard for him to forget his past.

Matthew had the same feelings. He never forgot that he had been an enemy of Jesus. He knew the feeling of rejection as he had worked as a tax collector. Later in his Gospel as Matthew lists the 12 disciples that Jesus had called, he lists himself as **"Matthew the tax collector."** Why would Matthew not forget what he had been before Jesus calls him to follow Jesus? Tax collectors were lumped together with other notorious sinners as a group with whom no good person would want to associate with.

Why? Tax collectors could be characterized as sub-contractors of the Roman government. Tax collectors ran a very lucrative business in those days. The tax system worked a bit differently than it would work today. A person would apply to the Roman government to become a collector in a certain area. They looked at how many people lived in a certain area and they would pre-pay the tax to the Roman government for each person that lived in that area. The tax collector would then collect that tax that he had assessed on each person. On top of that tax, he could add on whatever "fee" he wanted to and the people would have to pay it. There was no appeal process. You had to pay. You can be sure that Matthew found it hard to forget his past as well.

Yet, these men may have never forgot their past, Jesus did forget their past. When Matthew got up that morning and went to his tax collecting booth, he had no idea what would happen next in his life. He had no idea that on that day, he was going to get a visit from Jesus of Nazareth. Even though most didn't like Matthew, Jesus saw an opportunity to show mercy. On that day, he was going to call Matthew to be one of his disciples. When Jesus looked at Matthew, he saw a man who needed what he had to give – mercy. All Jesus needed to say was: **"Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him."**

Not only did Jesus call Matthew to follow him, he goes to Matthew's house for dinner. **"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"** Yet, that is exactly why

Jesus went to the house of Matthew that day. Jesus comes to people and meets them where they are at, not where they should be. Without Jesus, nobody is where they should be. The Pharisees knew sacrifice and rules. They prided themselves on keeping the rules and doing every sacrifice to the letter. However, they were blind to mercy. Jesus' purpose in this world was simple: **"On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** Those who were sick were people like Matthew, or Moses, or Paul or you and me. As Jesus is beginning his ministry, he wants people to see that with him things are going to be different. He looked at this world through the eyes of mercy. He will call people to follow him on the basis of his mercy. Only mercy can explain the men he chose in this Sunday's readings: a despised tax collector, an exiled killer and a persecutor of Christians.

God's mercy is really all about forgetting the sinful past and to remember God's mercy. The prophet Jeremiah speaks about the mercy of God: **"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."** (Jer. 31:34) Those words are almost hard to believe. God forgets our past and all the sins in it. As the Psalmist writes: **"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."** (Ps 130:3-4) As Jesus calls his disciples, he calls them to follow him because of his mercy. When Jesus calls Matthew, the tax collector, there was not probationary period for Matthew. If he did okay with that for a while, then he could become one of the Apostles. He just says: **"Follow me."**

With two simple words, **"Follow me,"** Matthew's life was about to change right before his very own eyes. We don't know if Matthew had heard Jesus speak before. Did he just hear about Jesus? But on that day, Jesus was going to call Matthew out of a life of sin. When people looked at Matthew, all they could see is the sin in Matthew's life. But Jesus saw forgiveness. Jesus calls us to follow him through his mercy. Even though we might remember our past, Jesus doesn't. Through his mercy, he gives us hope. Through his blood on the cross, he washes our sins completely away and **"remembers (our) sin no more."** May we give thanks, that God doesn't remember our past and remembers our sins no more. Amen.