

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

BECKONING GOD, YOU PROMISE LONG JOURNEYS AND NEW NAMES. CALL US OUT TO RISK HOLY ADVENTURE WITH UNUSUAL TABLE COMPANIONS. LINGER WITH US SO THAT WE MAY BE FAITHFUL DISCIPLES, TOUCHING THE FRINGE OF YOUR HEALING ON BEHALF OF ALL YOUR CHILDREN.

THERE'S A STORY ABOUT A MAN, WHO EVERY DAY DURING HIS LUNCH BREAK, OPENED HIS LUNCH BOX, EXTRACTED THE CONTENTS, AND COMPLAINED, "SAME OLD BOLGNA SANDWICH! I'M SO TIRED OF BOLGNA SANDWICHES! I HATE BOLGNA! I'D GIVE ANYTHING FOR A DIFFERENT SANDWICH SOME DAY! WELL, WHY DON'T YOU ASK YOUR WIFE TO MAKE YOU DIFFERENT SANDWICHES?" A CO-WORKER ASKED. TO WHICH THE MAN REPLIED: "MY WIFE DOESN'T MAKE THE SANDWICHES. I DO."

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT US THAT DOESN'T LIKE CHANGE. CHANGE IS DIFFICULT. MOVING FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER CAN BE A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE. LEAVING OLD SECURITIES AND CERTAINTIES BEHIND, ESTABLISHED ROUTINES AND TRADITIONS, AND LAUNCHING INTO AN UNKNOWN FUTURE CAN BE POSITIVELY TERRIFYING. A NEW JOB, A NEW COMMUNITY, NEW CHURCH FAMILY, NEW SCHOOL, A NEW BUSINESS VENTURE--- MOVING STIRS UP NOSTALGIA FOR THE OLD AND SECURE, AND FEAR FOR THE NEW AND UNKNOWN. THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT US THAT DOESN'T LIKE CHANGE, DOESN'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH CHANGE.

CHANGE IS DIFFICULT. SOME YEARS AGO A LITTLE BOOK GAINED POPULARITY...*WHO MOVED MY CHEESE*..WAS THE TITLE. *WHO MOVED MY CHEESE* IS ABOUT TWO MICE AND TWO LITTLE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN A MAZE AND LOVE THEIR CHEESE, DEPND ON CHEESE, ORGANIZE THEIR LIVES AROUND THE CHEESE BEING WHERE IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE EVERY DAY. AND THEN ONE DAY SOMEBODY MOVES THE CHEESE. THE MICE SET OUT TO LOOK FOR NEW CHEESE, BUT THE LITTLE PEOPLE BEHAVE AS PEOPLE OFTEN DO AND SIT AROUND COMPLAINING AND WHINING ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF CHEESE, TRYING TO FIND SOMEONE TO BLAME FOR THE MISSING CHEESE. FINALLY, OF COURSE, THEY DECIDE TO MOVE, TO CHANGE THEIR ROUTINES, THEIR OLD CERTAINTIES AND SECURITIES, AND FIND NEW CHEESE. IT'S HARDLY A

PROFOUND BOOK, BUT IT WAS A BEST SELLER PRECISELY BECAUSE CHANGE IS ALWAYS DIFFICULT.

WELL, IN TODAY'S GOSPEL JESUS MOVED MATTHEW'S CHEESE.

JESUS WAS WALKING ALONG A STREET IN THE TOWN OF CAPERNAUM, WHERE HE LIVED. AND "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. JUST LIKE THAT. MATTHEW WASN'T MUCH OF A CANDIDATE FOR JESUS' ATTENTION. HE WAS SITTING AT THE LOCAL TAX BOOTH BECAUSE HE WAS A TAX COLLECTOR. THROUGHOUT THE ROMAN EMPIRE, THE FUNCTION OF COLLECTING IMPERIAL TAXES WAS SOLD TO BROKERS WHO WERE PEOPLE OF WEALTH AND POWER. IN TURN, THESE REGIONAL BROKERS SOLD THE FUNCTION TO LOCAL OPERATORS. MATTHEW WAS ONE OF THOSE. THE SYSTEM WORKED BY ALLOWING THE LOCAL COLLECTOR TO SET THE RATES. AFTER ALL, IN ABSENCE OF NEWSPAPERS, TELEVISION, SOCIAL MEDIA, HOW WOULD YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE OFFICAL AMOUNT OF TAX ROME HAD LEVIED FROM WHAT THE TAX COLLECTOR SAID YOU OWED? THE LOCAL TAX COLLECTOR SET THE RATES HIGH ENOUGH TO PAY THE BROKER THE ACTUAL TAX, THE BROKER'S FEE, AND THEN KEPT WHATEVER WAS LEFT AS HIS PROFIT. TAX COLLECTORS WERE NOT VERY POPULAR. THERE WAS SOMETHING UNSAVORY ABOUT WORKING FOR ROME IN THE FIRST PLACE, NOT TO MENTION THE FACT THAT WHATEVER WEALTH THE TAX COLLECTORS ACCUMULATED CAME FROM THEIR NEIGHBORS POCKETS. THE SYSTEM WAS BUILT ON SELF-INTEREST. AND THAT IS WHY TAX COLLECTORS ARE CHARACTERIZED AS SINNERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. THE PHRASE "TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS" IS USED COMMONLY IN SCRIPTURE; THEY GO TOGETHER. SO THAT IS WHO JESUS RECRUITS AND WHO GETS UP FROM HIS COUNTING TABLE, WALKS AWAY FROM HIS SECURITY AND INCOME, HIS VERY IDENTITY, TO FOLLOW JESUS TO A NEW PLACE.

WHEN I READ THIS STORY I AM ALWAYS STRUCK BY MATTHEW'S WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW JESUS AS WELL AS WHERE JESUS LED HIM AND WHERE MATTHEW FOUND HIMSELF. MATTHEW'S MOVE IS NOT JUST GEOGRAPHICAL. IN FACT, HE DOESN'T MOVE VERY FAR

FROM HOME. MATTHEW'S MOVE IS FIRST OF ALL SOCIAL, RELATIONAL, AND THEN THEOLOGICAL...AND THAT IS SOMETIMES A LOT HARDER THAN MOVING TO A NEW PLACE.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, MATTHEW FOUND HIMSELF AT A DIFFERENT TABLE. MATTHEW MOVED FROM THE PREDICABILITY OF HIS TAX TABLE TO A MOST UNLIKELY DINNER TABLE, WITH A VERY DIFFERENT PARTY OF GUESTS.

“AND AS HE SAT AT DINNER IN THE HOUSE, MANY TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS CAME AND WERE SITTING WITH HIM.” THIS IS A VERY PECULIAR GATHERING. “OTHER TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS—THE PEOPLE WHO SIMPLY IGNORED OR DISOBEYED THE LAW OF MOSES, THE VERY ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE OF LIFE WITH ALL ITS REQUIREMENTS AND RESTRICTIONS AND PROHIBITIONS; THE AMORAL AND THE IMMORAL; THE RUFFIANS AND THE SCOUNDRELS; THE MARGINAL AND OUTCASTS; THE VERY ONES A GOOD, UPRIGHT PERSON WOULD NEVER ASSOCIATE WITH OR EAT WITH. IN FACT, THE LAW PROHIBITED IT. AND HERE WAS JESUS, INVITING THEM IN SHARING HIS OWN FOOD, EXTENDING HOSPITALITY. NO WONDER THE PHARISEES SNIFFED, “WHY DOES HE EAT WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS?” MATTHEW HIMSELF, A TAX COLLECTOR, WAS PROBABLY WONDERING THE SAME THING. “WHAT ARE THEY DOING HERE? FOR THAT MATTER, WHAT AM I DOING HERE?”

THAT TABLE, WHICH, BY THE WAY, IS A KIND OF PICTURE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD - - IS A NEW PLACE FOR MATTHEW...A CHANGE..WHO, WHEN HE MADE THE DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS, DIDN'T KNOW WHERE HE WAS GOING BUT SURELY NEVER THOUGHT IT WOULD BE AT A DINNER PARTY FOR SINNERS.

AND THEN THE UNLIKELY JOURNEY CONTINUES. A LOCAL RELIGIOUS LEADER APPEARS AND PLEADS WITH JESUS TO COME WITH HIM BECAUSE HIS DAUGHTER HAS JUST DIED. IT'S A POIGNANT STORY. THIS MAN, THE SYNAGOGUE LEADER IS ALSO A DESPERATE FATHER, CROSSES A HUGE BARRIER BY REACHING OUT TO JESUS, WHO IS STILL SITTING AT THE TABLE WITH HIS UNSAVORY BUT COLORFUL FRIENDS. JESUS GETS UP; HIS DISCIPLES FOLLOW, MATTHEW, STILL BRAND NEW AT THE FOLLOWING BUSINESS, TAGGING ALONG. ON THE WAY THERE IS AN INTERRUPTION—ANOTHER NEW EXPERIENCE—A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN

HEMORRHAGING FOR 12 YEARS TOUCHES JESUS' CLOAK. MATTHEW HAS NEVER BEEN CLOSE TO SOMEONE LIKE HER. THIS WOMAN IS TABOO. IRONICALLY, BECAUSE OF HER PHYSICAL CONDITION SHE ISN'T EVEN ALLOWED INSIDE THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE LEADER WHOSE DEAD DAUGHTER JESUS IS ON HIS WAY TO SEE. IF YOU TOUCH THE WOMAN YOU ARE IMPURE, UNCLEAN. SHE TOUCHES JESUS. HE CALLS HER DAUGHTER AND HEALS HER, AND NOW MATTHEW HAS A NEW FAMILY MEMBER.

THE JOURNEY RESUMES. THE ENTOURAGE WITH MATTHEW TAGGING ALONG ARRIVES AT THE SYNAGOGUE LEADER'S HOUSE. THE GIRL IS ALREADY DEAD. SHE IS TABOO, UNCLEAN ACCORDING TO THE LAW. JESUS TOUCHES HER. HER LIFE IS RESTORED. HE HAS NOT HAD PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH TWO TABOO PERSONS; EATEN WITH SINNERS—SO JESUS IS RITUALLY UNCLEAN. THE GOSPEL WRITER SAYS, "THE REPORT OF THIS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE REGION." THE REPORT OF THE MIRACULOUS HEALING AND RESTORATION? PROBABLY. BUT ALSO SOMETHING MIRACULOUS—THIS NEW THING, THIS MAN WHO LEAVES ALL THE OLD CERTAINTIES AND SECURITIES AND ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES BEHIND AND DOES SOMETHING RADICALLY NEW: TOUCHES, EMBRACES, AND WELCOMES THE REJECTED, THE OUTCASTS, THE MORALLY AND PHYSICALLY IMPURE AND UNCLEAN.

THE WORLD HAD NEVER SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE IT AND STILL HASN'T. THE WORLD IS STILL SURPRISED AND UNCERTAIN AND UNSETTLED WHEN JESUS' FOLLOWERS ACTUALLY FOLLOW HIM...DOING WHAT HE DID. OFTEN HIS FOLLOWERS REFUSE TO FOLLOW, CAN'T QUITE BRING THEMSELVES TO FOLLOW, CAN'T OR WON'T LEAVE OLD PREJUDICES BEHIND TO FOLLOW HIM TO THAT KINGDOM WHERE THERE ARE NO BARRIERS AND BOUNDARIES AND EXCLUSIONS AND PREJUDICES, TO THAT TABLE WHERE ALL ARE WELCOME, THAT TABLE WHERE JESUS IS THE HOST AND WHERE HE WELCOMES PRECISELY THOSE THE RIGHTEOUS REJECT.

THE RIGHTEOUS. THE RIGHTEOUS WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES TO BE IN NEED. MIGHT IT BE THAT THE SINNERS IN THIS STORY RECOGNIZE THEIR OWN NEED, WHILE THOSE WHO SEE THEMSELVES AS RIGHTEOUS ARE TOO FULL OF PRIDE TO COMPREHEND THEIR NEED FOR GOD'S GRACEFUL MERCY? DECLARING ONESELF RIGHTEOUS BEFORE JESUS IS TO

MAKE A CLAIM THAT NO PERSON CAN EVER SUSTAIN. WE ARE ALL SINNERS, BUT THE SINNER WHO UNDERSTANDS THEIR NEED IS DIFFERENT FROM THE SINNER WHO CLAIMS TO NEED NO ASSISTANCE; THE FORMER WELCOMES JESUS INTO THEIR LIFE, WHILE THE LATTER SLAMS SHUT THE DOORS OF JESUS WELCOME. CHRIST HOLDS CLOSE THOSE WHO ARE MOST IN NEED OF GOD'S MERCY AND WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR NEED.

RIGHTEOUS OR SINNER? WHERE ARE WE THIS MORNING? HAVE WE FALLEN IN THE TRAP OF REVERSING WHOLE ASPECTS OF JESUS' TEACHINGS BY REJECTING THE ONES JESUS SEEMED INTENT ON SWEEPING INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD? HAVE WE FAITHFULLY FOLLOWED? ADHEREING TO ALL JESUS REQUIRES?

THE SCRIPTURAL CHALLENGE BEFORE US TODAY: MOVE FROM WHERE WE ARE TO A NEW PLACE; LET GO OF OLD SECURITIES AND CERTAINITIES AND HOLD TIGHTLY TO JESUS; TO SUMMON THE COURAGE TO BE OPEN TO JESUS'S OPENNESS. TO COME OUT FROM BEHIND OUR BARRIERS AND LIVE IN THE GLORIOUS FREEDOM OF HIS LOVE. AMEN.

JESUS, WE BOW IN WONDER AT THE EXPANSE OF YOUR EMBRACE, THE BREADTH OF YOUR INCLUSION, THE SURPRISE OF YOUR GRACE. HEAR OUR PRAYERS AND MAKE US FAITHFUL STEWARDS OF THE FRAGILE BOUNTY OF THIS EARTH. LORD IN YOUR MERCY

YOU SEEK AND SEEK AND SEEK, INCLUDING THOSE WE WRITE OFF AS BEYOND HOPE, THE OUTCASTS, THE SINNERS, THE SELF-SERVING...YET WE OURSELVES ARE SINNERS IN NEED OF YOUR SAVING GRACE. LORD IN YOUR MERCY,

LORD GOD, FRIEND OF THOSE IN NEED, YOUR SON JESUS HAS UNTIED OUR BURDENS AND HEALED OUR SPIRITS. WE LIFT UP IN PRAYER THOSE STILL BURDENED, THOSE SEEKING HEALING, THOSE IN NEED ANYWHERE THIS DAY. WE ESPECIALLY PRAY FOR.. LORD IN YOUR MERCY..

FORGIVE US; FORGIVE US FOR FORGETTING WHO YOU ARE; FORGIVE US FOR FORGETTING OUR OWN SIN AND ISOLATION AND COLLABORATION. FORGIVE US FOR JUDGING; FOR OUR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. FORGIVE US FOR LIMITING YOU WHEN WE ARE SO DESPERATELY IN NEED OF YOU. REMIND US WE ARE 'THOSE MOST IN NEED'. LORD IN YOUR MERCY...

ALMIGHTY FATHER, HEAL OUR LIVES, THAT WE MAY ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR WONDERFUL DEEDS AND OFFER YOU THANKS FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD