

Lessons:

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Proper 5

Hi. I'm Matt. -- You just finished reading about me!

Now I know you think you know me...I'm the tax guy who left his job so I could hang out with Jesus -- and then I went on to write a book about it.

Yes, it was a bestseller -- and I collected zippo royalties

Not that I'm obsessed with it...But even though that Gospel has my name on it -- trust me, the story is much more complicated than that.

You see, I had written no less than ten chapters about my life in the original manuscript -- but my book editor is an even bigger stickler than your newsletter editor Edna Buday - which basically means that my 'whole' story just didn't make the cut.

So I'm here this morning to fill in the gaps.

And more importantly, I'm here because I think you might hear some echoes of your own story as well. (Thomas Groome)

My story really began with a big boom in my business.

There was this one week when a whole bunch of people started showing up at my tax office to settle their accounts -- they were actually volunteering to pay their taxes.

They said they had gone to the river and heard a man named John the Baptist telling them to get their lives in order -- to get right with God.

That meant, paying their debts -- and taking my advertising slogan literally -- Perhaps you've ever heard it:

"Come to Matthew's Tax Service: Render Unto Caesar That Which Is Caesar's."

In fact, Jesus liked that last line so much, I let him borrow it.

Anyway, all these people started coming into my office to pay their taxes -- some were even paying up before they were due! -- And they were actually being nice to me!

I don't know if you know much about tax guys -- but back then we really didn't have a very good reputation.

I'm sure you all are much more civilized today -- but back then, my office actually had to stay open on April 15 past five o'clock!

I was so impressed by these people that I closed the office one day and went down to the Jordan River to check out this John the Baptist.

Down by the river bank I saw this huge line of people wading into the water to get baptized by John.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

That's when I first saw Jesus.

He was at the head of the line -- and John was just about to baptize him.

And that's when things got bizarre. -- The skies got dark, the clouds parted, the wind picked up -- And a white bird came zooming out of the sky -- and out of nowhere came this booming voice that I'll never forget.

It said:

"This is my Son, my Anointed One, listen to him!"

The crowd absolutely froze.

We were looking for someone on a mountain who was talking really loudly -- And we looked on in amazement as the bird came down, settled on Jesus, then took off.

Nobody said a word -- All we could hear was the quiet rush of the river -- the wind through the trees -- And basically, a pin drop.

That's when Jesus got up, out of the river -- and passed by dozens of other people -- to come right over to me.

This man whom I had never met before stood there for a moment -- Then called me by name.

He said:

"Matthew, come follow me."

A feeling of absolute peacefulness began to overtake me. -- Something awakened in me that had died long, long ago.

It was more than a mere man speaking to me -- and I began to reach back -- to re-establish the connection with the simple honesty of my youth -- when I used to feel like God was really close to me.

For the first time in I don't know how long, I began to see, again, my innocence.

Four words of invitation from a simple man I had never met before.

"Matthew, come follow me."

And these words were beginning to transform me.

Oh how I longed for this...

"But wake up man!" I thought to myself -- I had a business to run.

I had mortgages to pay -- servants and employees to support -- a lifestyle that I had grown very comfortable with.

After all, a man like me doesn't get rich by getting in touch with his inner child -- and making impulsive and reckless decisions -- I would lose it all if I dropped everything and followed him.

So I didn't. -- I walked away. -- I didn't even give him an answer.

And I'll never forget that restless feeling.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

In fact, you and I might pause right now and ask ourselves about the times this week, or in the recent past, when we felt Jesus calling us.

Where and when did we feel God's presence? -- Did we hear his voice? -- What did it say?

Did we resist, or did we say yes?

In what ways did we say yes?

In what ways are we resisting his call because of other obligations?

How might we better recall that voice?

How might we adjust our focus to say "yes?"

You see, that's what I had to do.

I went back to the office, to a flood of business -- yet I couldn't get my mind off of what had happened down by the river that day -- and the words Jesus had said, "Matthew, come follow me."

It was a nagging invitation -- It was a scary invitation.

Yet I was determined to think it through -- what would it mean to 'get clean' again?

The homes, the food, the lifestyle, were they really worth that much to me?

I began to long more and more for that peacefulness that I had felt in Jesus' presence.

And that's when Jesus showed up at my office. -- It's like he knew I was ready.

He gave me a second chance. -- Two words this time: "Follow me."

This time, I did.

And my employees didn't know what to do.

 "Hey boss, who's going to lock up?"

 "Who's going to balance the books?"

 "Who's going to pick up your dry cleaning?"

Somehow none of that was important anymore. -- Somehow, following Jesus was what was important.

I was off on a Great Adventure.

And I wasn't the only one.

That night I went to dinner with Jesus and some of his friends.

These were people just like me -- other tax guys, some casino workers, a transvestite, a couple of exotic dancers.

None of them were what we might call religious people.

But all of them, I would have to say, were spiritual people. -- These were people with hearts. -- They were people wrestling with their purpose in life.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

These were real people -- who had been down many roads -- and somehow ended up here.

It was like a gathering of "Sinners Anonymous".

We were just a bunch of random people who had one thing in common:

We had come to grips with the fact that we weren't perfect -- and that the only way to get peace into our lives was through God.

And all of us had come to the conclusion that right there, smack dab in front of us, was God.

So there we were, having a great time over dinner -- and guess who showed up?

It was those Bible beaters. -- Not the normal religious people that I know... they're cool.

But it's those fundamentalists -- I don't know if you have those around anymore.

But these were the Judgy-McJudgertons of our day -- These guys were absolutely obsessed with the rules of religion.

In fact, you can define these guys by what they're against:

--They're against rescuing your cow on the Sabbath when it falls into a ditch -- even if it's your livelihood.

--They're against talking in public with women -- even if it's the lady who's lived next door all your life.

--They're against fabric-mixing

--They're against leather-touching

--They're basically against anything that gets in the way of their interpretation of religion.

They're the very first ones to point the finger -- and the very last ones to admit they're wrong.

Anyway, they showed up at dinner too.

They didn't talk to any of us -- we weren't good enough.

But they did ask Jesus a bunch of questions -- including my favorite:
why he'd ever be caught dead with us 'sinners.'

And Jesus gave an answer that made me like Him even more.

In his best Homer Simpson voice Jesus said:

"Duh.

"Do doctors visit healthy people?"

Of course not.

If God is all about helping people with big problems -- wouldn't he hang around people with big problems?

This had 'Judgy and friends' pretty mystified -- so Jesus sent them on their way, scratching their heads and stroking their beards.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

And it made me wonder -- as it may, you -- What is it about religion that turns people into judges?

Can we get so proud of our Episcopal Church that we judge or even condemn other religions, or even other Christians, even fundamentalists?

Shouldn't we leave the judging to Jesus?

Who are we judging this morning?

Wouldn't it be better to accept people, and leave the judging to God?

Of course it would. -- It's just really hard to do.

It really is hard to love people -- which is why all of us hung around Jesus.

You see, it was love that characterized Jesus more than anything else.

Take what happened next -- when this guy from the synagogue showed up.

He wasn't one of those fundamentalists, but a really sincere guy whose little girl had died.

His name is Jairus, and I've known him for years -- which is why I didn't even give his name in my book, Mark and Luke already had.

But Jairus and his wife had tried to have a baby for years.

And finally, after they'd given up -- what happened? -- what always happens? -- out comes the baby.

Her name was Talitha.

It means 'beautiful little girl.' -- And boy, was she ever.

Jairus was one of the few religious people who would actually stop and talk to me on his way to the synagogue -- and I would always have a piece of candy for his bright-eyed little girl -- and Jairus always saw that she took it, from me, a tax collector.

So there he was -- Jairus, in all his humility -- a really important synagogue guy -- interrupting our dinner.

When everybody saw who it was, things got quiet.

You could hear the murmurs:

"Is Jairus coming to accuse Jesus of breaking the law?"

"Be careful Jesus, it could be a trap!"

Then Jairus did something amazing -- he got down on his knees and pleaded with Jesus to come make Talitha well.

Immediately Jesus said, "Sure, lead the way."

So all of us got up and followed. -- We took the main road through town, past the beggars and prostitutes.

That's when it happened.

All of a sudden one of those beggar-women came rushing out into the street.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

I'd recognized her -- I'd even put money in her beggar's cup before.

She had this terrible illness -- she couldn't stop bleeding in the way of a woman -- and she was so desperate to be cured she came pushing up behind Jesus.

I could hear her say, "If I can just touch him, I'll be ok."

And nobody wanted her to -- We knew what the Law said about women like her -- we'd be unclean for the rest of the day if we touched her and he'd never make it to Jairus' house.

So I told her, "Don't touch him!"

But she said, I only want to touch his prayer shawl and I'll be ok!"

Again, I warned her, "Don't touch him!"

But before I could get to her - she touched him.

Jesus suddenly stopped. -- He turned around. -- And asked who touched him?

I was going to lie to him, and tell him it was someone else -- but the woman 'fessed up.

She admitted that she, an unclean woman, touched Jesus!

That's when Jesus did something extraordinary.

He didn't yell at her -- He didn't hit her -- He talked to her!

He treated this outcast woman like it was his own daughter.

And he promised her that she would be healed.

And that's when it happened. -- All of a sudden, the color began to come back into her face.

She started to stand up straight -- And a smile ripped across her face as she gave Jesus the biggest hug you've ever seen.

"I'm healed!" She shouted.

Jairus had to pry the two apart -- It was apparent that he, or anyone else among us, no longer worried about whether or not Jesus was clean.

We knew right then, that Jesus could heal anybody.

Which is what happened next -- No sooner had we broken through the musicians and mourners gathered outside Jairus' house, when Jesus made his way into Talitha's room.

And breaking another one of those rules -- Jesus touched her lifeless body.

But... she was not lifeless for long.

We all watched as Talitha's eyes opened.

Out went her arms as she reached for, hugged and kissed her mother and father -- All three of them, all of us, were crying like babies.

Jairus put his daughter on his shoulders and paraded around the front lawn -- those mourners and musicians changed their tune in no time flat -- Everyone began dancing and singing for joy.

"Hi, I'm Matt"

Pentecost 4, RCL-A, Sunday, June 8, 2008

People came from miles all around to see this little girl brought back to life.

That day we learned an amazing lesson about God -- And how God can fix absolutely anything.

Which is what God is still up to today.

In fact, I bet some of us have stories of our own about how Jesus has done the impossible in our lives.

But this morning, we may need some assurance that He still can.

Some of us here are facing insurmountable challenges.

It seems like a solution is as unbelievable as raising someone from the dead.

But I am here to tell you that I have seen the dead raised. -- I have seen the power of God in Christ.

I have seen physical, psychological, and spiritual healing.

Whatever it is we are carrying this morning -- Jesus wants to take it.

And let's suppose He doesn't take it -- well, He will be there to help you through it.

Who else could be so close?

In a few moments, the bread and the wine will be taken, blessed, broken and offered.

They are the symbols and the reality of Christ's presence with us right here this morning.

So as we come to the altar, let us bring with us those impossible burdens -- those insurmountable tasks -- and let us come meet the Jesus who eats with sinners, heals the outcast and raises the dead.

Let Him do this for us today.

Amen.

** Much of this sermon was based on a similar format by Thomas Groome who preached on Jairus in 2000 at: "http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/groome_4403.htm"