

Pent 2, Proper 5A
06/11/23
All Saints Church

In the name of God, Justice, Love, and Joy. Amen.

Good morning. Today we begin the long Pentecost season of readings about major stories and themes, read mostly continuously from week to week. But before I start talking about the Gospel lesson, I want to tell you about a television series called “The Chosen.” It is about Jesus and his disciples.

My sister told me about it and suggested I might want to watch it. It is produced by a group called Angel Studios, and my first reaction was to remember the cheesy bible movies of my childhood, with mostly Caucasian movie stars and Hollywood studio sets.

But my sister wouldn't steer me wrong, so I tried it. The Roman soldiers are white. The Jews are various shades of brown. The Romans sound like Americans, but all the other people have accents. The Jews' houses are simple and sparse. The Romans have luxurious houses and they don't want to be there. The water in which the Jews fish looks like the Bay, not swimming-pool blue. The men sweat when they work. You get the picture.

So I watched the first season, and I thought I would like to see more of it.

There are three seasons so far, and more seasons are in the works.

There is no fee to watch it, and you can find it on a number of different platforms on TV, on your computer, or iPad or phone. It's best to look it up on the internet to find the best way for you to get it.

Anyway, since today's Gospel lesson is about the calling of Matthew to be one of Jesus' disciples, I decided I would skip to the second season for the moment, in order to watch the episode in Season 3 about Jesus' calling of Matthew.

Beginning our reading at chapter 9, we learn that Matthew, a Jew, is a tax collector. The Romans require payment of taxes from the Jews and, I presume, any other groups that the Romans rule over. In “The Chosen,” Matthew is smaller in stature than most of the others, a nervous sort of person, and lives in a much nicer house than any of the other Jews' homes that are depicted. But Matthew is an unhappy person. The Jews despise him. His parents have disowned him and will not speak to him.

In today's reading, Matthew is sitting at the tax booth, where he collects the taxes from fellow Jews. Jesus is walking by the booth and sees Matthew; he calls to Matthew and says, “Follow me.” And Matthew leaves the booth and follows him.

It is Matthew's house where Jesus goes to eat dinner with his disciples and Matthew, and many other "tax collectors and sinners." Tax collectors were morally suspect: they contracted with the occupying power and practiced extortion. And by "sinners" Matthew means members of despised trades considered ritually unclean.

Then, the Pharisees show up (The Pharisees were an ancient Jewish sect, who strictly observed the traditional and written law, and who had a lot of power and pretensions of superior sanctity.). When they saw Jesus eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they asked why he ate with them. And when Jesus heard this, he said, "You don't need a doctor if you are well; but you need one when you are sick. I have come to call sinners, not the righteous."

It's important to note that Jesus doesn't criticize the sinners. He doesn't demand their repentance. He simply eats and drinks with them.

Jesus calls this man of unacceptable status and he gets up and follows after him. Implied in Matthew's following of Jesus is that he left his desk, the symbol of his profession and the root of his sinfulness. God never calls us **to** something, without first calling us **away from** something.

The call of God is a far-ranging, far-reaching call. Jesus calling a tax collector is a controversial call. Tax collectors were despised because they were often believed to cheat the people whose taxes they were instructed to collect. They were considered to be no better than swindlers and murderers; and they were believed to be guilty of flagrant moral offenses.

The second part of this reading concerns two physical healings: a young girl who has died, and a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, which makes her ritually unclean, and means she can't touch anyone without making them unclean as well.

The father of the young girl comes to plead for Jesus to heal his daughter.

A crowd gathers around Jesus, including a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. She says to herself, "If I could only touch the fringe of his cloak, I would be healed." Jesus turns when he feels the power go out of him at her touch, and he says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." In the show, she runs to a private place to discover that she has, in fact, no more flow of blood. And then she runs to the edge of the sea and rushes in to feel the freedom of the water around her.

Next the father begs Jesus to go with him to their house. He had told the household members **not** to get the flute players (who would be hired to play at her death) and a number of mourners, but they were playing when they arrived!

So, Jesus says, "Go away! The girl is not dead; she is sleeping."

Everyone laughed at him. But the crowd was put outside, and Jesus went in and took her by the hand, and the girl opened her eyes and got up. And, as Matthew wrote, “the report of this spread throughout the district.

Jesus healed the young girl and the woman in dramatic fashion.

But if you stop and really think about it, the most difficult “miracle” in today’s text is not the raising of the girl from death, nor the healing of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. The most difficult healing was receiving the despised tax collector Matthew back into the community. If you don’t believe it, try thinking of a person your community despises and invite them to church with you.

Matthew was someone who took a really lousy job, in which he handled everybody’s stuff, looking for what ought to be taxed, picking up and spreading any uncleanness he might have encountered—someone who took a position that shut him out of respectability because he knew that nobody would ever let him in anyway.

But Jesus invited him to his table, to his companionship, to his friendship—even to his vocation, to come with him as a disciple. Jesus embraced someone seen as untouchable, and in doing that, he showed that, oddly enough, the purity of God’s people is best protected not by shunning the unclean, but by embracing them. God’s perfection is shown most fully not in flaws noted and shut out, or scores kept and settled, but in welcome embrace of flawed people and the end of all scorekeeping.

Have mercy! As followers of Jesus, that’s not a cry of despair, but a testimony of hope. We have seen the limitless mercy that is the most fundamental power in the universe, and we are empowered to extend it in the same wildly extravagant way that Jesus did in calling Matthew, with justice, love, and joy. AMEN.