

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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***Eating with sinners***

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. 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'?" 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."

—Matthew 9:9-13

I am going to take wild guess that none of you here today absolutely loves ... paying taxes. Am I right? Does anybody love paying taxes? We pay a lot of them, don't we? There's income tax, social security tax, Medicare tax. There's personal property tax, real estate tax, sales tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax. There are federal, state, and local taxes. All that adds up to a whole lot of money. It's also a whole lot to keep track of. At the federal level alone, the IRS has some 75,000 full time employees. And then there are all the people who work in the private sector just to help businesses and individuals navigate the complexities of the tax code. That's a whole lot more than 75,000.

Do those facts stir up any emotions in you? If they do, I'm guessing that those emotions are *not* appreciation and excitement. If anything, maybe it's frustration or resentment, especially if you are not a big fan of how your government is managing those dollars. But, my friends, count your blessings. At least we live in a country where we get to have a voice in electing the individuals who do tax us. In the first century in Palestine, in Jesus' day, they didn't have a voice like that. The Romans were the rulers. And they set up puppet governments of their own choosing who then made the people pay for the rulers they chose. They would take the people's money in order to fund the leaders they wanted in place. They took the people's money in order to keep them under their control.

And of course, the Romans needed someone to administer all this, and who better to do it than some of the Israelites' own people? Put a Jewish face on the taxation, and it might not be such a stark reminder that their dollars were going to fund their oppressors. So, what do you think Jesus' disciples thought about Matthew, the tax collector? Traitor. Now, there's a lot we don't know about the tax system in the ancient world. But the Bible tells us this much. Matthew's tax collector's booth was located in the town of Capernaum along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. So, it stands to reason that his tax collecting had to do with charging for commercial services and goods that took place on the Sea of Galilee. I could imagine Matthew charging a fee every time a fisherman took his boat out. Or when the fishermen brought their fish to shore, they needed to weigh or count the fish and give the government it's cut in the revenue.

We don't know a whole lot about how Matthew operated his tax collecting booth. Whether or not Matthew was one of those who took a little bit extra to line his pockets at his countrymen's expense, the Bible doesn't say. But if he did, that would have been very consistent with the tax collector's modus operandi. So they were considered not only traitors, but also cheaters. And just think about this. The place where Matthew set up his tax collecting booth was in the same town where Jesus set up his home base for doing his ministry with his disciples. There's Matthew on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and at least a third of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. So, what do you think they thought of him? Look down on him. Maybe they thought, "Ugh! This is the guy who profits from giving our hard-earned money to our oppressors."

Do you think Matthew would have been somebody that Jesus' disciples would have wanted to hang out with? Hardly. I'm sure they wanted to avoid him and all his other tax collecting buddies as much as possible. But where do we eventually see the disciples in this account? Having dinner with Matthew. And not just Matthew, but with many tax collectors and "sinners." That phrase "sinners" would refer to people whom others consider the scum of the earth. Prostitutes would have been included in that group. Jesus and his disciples are having dinner with them. They are eating with sinners. How do they get to get point?

Or how about looking at this from the flip side? As Matthew is sitting in his tax collector's booth, what do you think Matthew thought of Jesus and his disciples? Or more specifically, what do you think Matthew expected when he saw Jesus walking toward his tax collector's booth? Do you think it was something like this: Oh, here's another religious leader coming to tell me everything that I am doing wrong? Here's another religious leader who is going to look down on me, shake his head at me and curl his lip at me. Whatever Matthew expected, Jesus didn't come up to him to berate him. Jesus came to him to change him. "**Follow me,**" Jesus said to him. And this wasn't following in the sense of walking behind someone. This was following in the sense of leaving your life behind and learning from someone else a different kind of life. So, this encounter gives us a stunning picture of the kind of Savior that Jesus is. When Jesus looks out on the world, he doesn't filter out the no-goods and the non-deserving and set his sights only on the people who already have their act together.

If that's what Jesus did, that would be like a doctor who just does wellness check-ups. Jesus isn't like that kind of doctor. Jesus is like trauma surgeon in the ER at Banner Desert Medical Center. He's the kind of doctor that goes after the worst cases. After all, what did Jesus say? **"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** So, Jesus went to the tax collector's booth. He goes to Matthew. The doctor goes to the patient and gets to work. **"Follow me."** And he spends time with Matthew and many others. Jesus went to each one, the people that everybody else figured were too lost to be found. And he eats with sinners. Why? Because they need Jesus.

Now, understand, when we're talking about eating with sinners today, we're not contradicting Psalm 1. Remember that psalm? **"How blessed is the man who does not walk in the advice of the wicked, who does not stand on the path with sinners, and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers."** We're not talking about "eating with sinners" as hanging out with them as they do their bad thing and joining in their sin. We're talking about eating with sinners as an invitation to connect with their lives so that we can influence them, so that they can meet our Savior. That's what Jesus is doing here. He is eating with sinners so that he can have an influence on their lives. So, could I ask you to just think to yourself for a few seconds or so, where do you think Jesus would go today to search out the sick? Where would Jesus go today to search out the sick? Do you have a place in mind? Do you have people in mind? Where would Jesus go today to search out the sick, those in need of a spiritual doctor?

You know that there are as many right answers as there are people in the world. But I think that's a useful exercise for us to go through. Look at people through Jesus' eyes. Jesus is eating with sinners. Oh, I'm sure that most of us thought about the people in our communities who are ostracized. People curl their lips. They turn away, pretending they aren't there. They are looked down upon, frowned upon. They are the kind of people who think they aren't good enough to be at a church. Maybe they are the people who think to themselves, "Why would I ever go to a church? The only thing people will do is look at me funny and stay away." My friends, do you think you would find Jesus eating dinner with *them*? You most certainly would. Why? Because they need Jesus.

Where would Jesus go today to search out the sick? I wonder if any of us thought about ourselves. What's your personal self-assessment? Spiritually? Healthy or sick? Imagine looking out your front window and seeing Jesus walking up your driveway. What do you think? As the perfect Son of God makes his way to your front door, what is going through your mind? Oh, no! Here comes Jesus to tell me everything that I am doing wrong. I better get my act together before he gets to the front door." My friends, Jesus isn't coming to you for a wellness checkup. **"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** And it's not like the sicker you are the less interested Jesus is in you. No, the sicker you are, the more you need him. So, he comes to you and says, **"Follow me."** Not just in the sense of walking behind, but **"Follow me"** and discover anew what real life really is and discover that you really have it in Jesus. And even if every other person in the world would react in the same way as the Pharisees reacted to Jesus calling Matthew, somewhere along the lines, "Why would Jesus want to call someone like *that*?" you know that wouldn't change Jesus' mind. His call still goes out to you: **Follow me.** Follow me and discover what you already know, what real life really is like, and that in Jesus you really have it.

And when you follow him, you know where he takes you? The same place where he eventually took Matthew: to his cross where he shows you your life in his death. That's your identity and that's your value to God and that's your hope in life and in death. It doesn't come from how well you can clean yourself up and well you make yourself right with God. That would be like a trauma surgeon taking a gunshot wound victim and wheeling him in the operating room and then standing there and doing nothing because he thinks that the patient should be able to take care of himself. That's not what surgeons do. They do surgery. They save. That's what Jesus does. He saves. He took the record of your sins, the record that separates you from God and that separates you from life, he took it all and put it on his own shoulders and put it into his own body and put his name on it; and as surely as that killed him, all of it is gone. Everything that separates you from God and from life is gone. That means God will never leave you. That means you have a life that nothing can take away. And that means you have *purpose*. We aren't here in this world to just exist. We aren't in this world right now just to wait and do nothing until Jesus comes back.

No, that would be like a gunshot victim who has recovered and just stays in his hospital bed. Look at the change that happened for Matthew. For Matthew, this new life resulted in a transformed life that everyone could see. He walked away from his tax collector's booth and became one of Jesus' twelve apostles. He invited people to his home so that others could meet Jesus, so that they too could meet the One who changes lives.

Just look at the change that happened for Matthew. He is no longer Matthew, the tax collector. He is Matthew the Gospel writer. God used Matthew to write the first book of the New Testament. I don't know if you thought about that before, but these words that we are looking at today were written by Matthew. He is telling us what God had done for him.

God has a purpose for you too. It's a God-lived life. It may not be as high-profile as apostleship where people are still talking about you 2,000 years from now. But you know, low-profile does not mean lower value in the eyes of your God who died for you. If you are at home alone praying for someone, no one else may ever know about it, but that prayer is heard and answered by the God who can move mountains. If you use your phone as a phone and call up someone who needs encouragement, that's probably not going to make the highlights on the evening news: one person calls another to encourage. But still that person will hear the love of God in the sound of your voice. If you open your home and invite your

neighbor over for dinner, that is probably not going to get a lot of retweets. But that neighbor will come in contact with one of God's children and can see the Bible passages and pictures hanging on your walls. If you go up to someone at church you don't know and warmly greet them and demonstrate love to them, that probably won't cause the newscasters to make a visit to Emmanuel. But that person will experience and see someone who took the time and effort to show hospitality. If you make or bake or bring some treats for some fellowship time, that probably won't get recorded in the historical records of our church. But it sure will reflect thoughtfulness in bridging kindness and love to others. It will demonstrate hospitality.

The biblical concept of hospitality is radical. Consider what Abraham did in the First Lesson today when strangers showed up. He begs them to let him get them something to eat. And then did you notice what he did? He ran and told Sarah to quick get 3 seahs of flour and make some bread. That's 93 cups of flour. That's a lot a bread. That's a lot of work. But he didn't just give her work. He then ran and got a calf from the herd, slaughtered, butchered, and roasted it—for strangers, for people he had just met, who happened to be passing by.

The Greek word the New Testament uses for hospitality is a combination of two words: Philos—you might recognize that word—love (like Philadelphia) and word that means "stranger, alien, foreigner." Biblical hospitality is literally a "love of strangers," not tolerance of strangers, or even acceptance of strangers, but love of strangers. It's the kind of love Jesus had for Matthew and the tax collectors and "sinners." It's being hospitable. It's giving people exactly what they need: Jesus. It's Matthew opening up his home to people and giving them exactly what they need: Jesus.

You know, this event of Jesus calling Matthew is written in three of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And each writer records this event in slightly different way. They aren't photocopies of each other. But there is something at the beginning that is striking. All three Gospel accounts begin the same way. They all tell us that "**Jesus saw Matthew.**" The story doesn't begin with Matthew seeing Jesus. "**Jesus saw Matthew.**" And when Jesus walked up to the tax collector's booth, he knew what he was getting himself into. He knew exactly what Matthew had been doing. But that didn't stop Jesus. That didn't keep Jesus away from him. In fact, it is the reason Jesus went up to Matthew. Because Matthew was sick, and Jesus was a doctor. Matthew was a sinner, and Jesus was his Savior. Jesus went to Matthew because Matthew needed him. Desperately.

If you ever feel like you are too messed up to ever be made right again or you are backsliding or way past purpose, or if anybody really knew you that they would drop you out of their lives, then remember how this account starts in every place it is written. "**Jesus saw Matthew.**" There wasn't anything about Matthew that Jesus didn't know. And there's nothing about you that Jesus doesn't know either. He knows what he is getting himself into. That's why he called you. That's why he made sure that you were baptized. Because you were sick, and you needed a doctor. You are a sinner, and you need a Savior. He knows everything about you, and yet he is here. He with us. If he were physically with us, he would be hanging out with us, eating with sinners. Oh, Jesus isn't physically with us, at least, not in the way where we can visibly see him or physically touch him. But his people are here. You are here. And out of love for Jesus, we can be hospitable to everybody. We can love because he first loved us.

Like those words we sang right before the sermon. "**So with one voice we'll sing to the Lord; and with one heart we'll live out his Word. Till the whole earth sees the Redeemer has come for he dwells in the presence of his people.**" The Redeemer has come for he dwells in the presence of his people. That's why will live a life of hospitality. Amen.