



The Challenge of Discipleship

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Year C, St Matthew's Day

Eph 4:1-7, 11-13; Matt 9:9-13

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Today we celebrate the third Sunday in the season of Creation. It just so happens to coincide with the actual St Matthew's feast day so I can't resist the opportunity to play a bit with both themes. What's more after today's service we'll have the chance to delve more deeply into themes that relate to our thinking about how we care for creation in this country.

In the gospel today we hear Jesus call Matthew the tax collector. Without ado Matthew gets up and follows. Immediately we find ourselves in the midst of a dinner party. Jesus and his disciples are hanging out with a disreputable crowd and censured for doing so, for boundary crossing, by religious leadership. This tells us something about Jesus. It could also be telling us what choosing to be a disciple might lead to. Being a disciple may lead to us seeing through the status quo, questioning it, being willing to upset and upend it.

The story takes place in a religious context. We hear it in a religious context. Matthew says "Yes" into this context. What **did** Matthew say yes to? By example, Jesus shows Matthew. Matthew said yes to a way that's willing to defy and deconstruct the identity rules of that same religious context. Jesus' retort falls within the context, within religious bounds, but his directive "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" reaches beyond such confine. Mercy, not sacrifice, is a founding orientation toward life, we could expand: compassion not condemnation, humility not hubris. Pretty much the opposite of the way we operate. The challenge of such orientation spills naturally and readily into our relationship with creation. It's hard to imagine what this might look like if we were to enact it.

Perhaps this parable 'Finding Faith' by Peter Rollins from his book 'The Orthodox Heretic,' will help. "There was once a fiery preacher who possessed a powerful but unusual gift. He found that, from an early age, when he prayed for individuals, they would supernaturally lose all of their religious convictions. They would invariably lose all of their beliefs about the prophets, the sacred Scriptures, and even God. So, the preacher learned not to pray for people but instead he limited himself to preaching inspiring sermons and doing good works. However, one day while travelling across the country, the preacher found himself in a conversation with a businessman who happened to be going in the same direction. The businessman was a very powerful and ruthless merchant banker, who was honoured by his colleagues and respected by his adversaries. Their conversation began because the businessman, possessing a deep, abiding faith, had noticed the preacher reading from the Bible. He introduced himself to the preacher and they began to talk. As they chatted together this powerful man told the preacher all about his faith in God and his love of Christ. He spoke of how his work did not really define who he was but was simply what he had to do.

"The world of business is a cold one," he confided to the preacher, "And in my line of work I find myself in situations that challenge my Christian convictions. But I try, as much as possible, to remain true to my faith. Indeed, I attend a local church every Sunday, participate in a prayer circle, engage in some youth work and contribute to a weekly Bible study. These activities help to remind me of who I really am.'

After listening carefully to the businessman's story, the preacher began to realize the purpose of his unseemly gift. So, he turned to the businessman and said, 'Would you allow me to pray a blessing onto your life?'

The businessman readily agreed, unaware of what would happen. Sure enough, after the preacher had muttered a simple prayer, the man opened his eyes in astonishment. 'What a fool I have been for all these years!' he proclaimed. 'It is clear to me now that there is no God above, who is looking out for me, and that there are no sacred texts to guide me, and there is no Spirit to inspire and protect me.'

As they parted company the businessman, still confused by what had taken place, returned home. But now that he no longer had any religious beliefs, he began to find it increasingly difficult to continue in his line of work. Faced with the fact that he was now just a hard-nosed businessman working in a corrupt system, rather than a man of God, he began to despise his work. Within months he had a breakdown, and soon afterward he gave up his line of work completely.

Feeling better about himself, he then went on to give to the poor all of the riches he had accumulated and he began to use his considerable managerial expertise to challenge the very system he once participated in, and to help those who had been oppressed by the system.

One day, many years later, he happened upon the preacher again while walking through town. He ran over, fell at the preacher's feet, and began to weep with joy. Eventually he looked up at the preacher and smiled, 'thank you, my dear friend, for helping me to discover my faith.'"

It's a curious tale, and one that's played over in my mind this last while, such is the nature of a parable. Is it proposing that the impetus and energy to act justly, to work to dismantle systems that oppress and diminish arises in us naturally? That the construct of religion serves to obstruct this.

Given it's St Matthew's day, a date in the calendar determined by church tradition over time, this gave me pause for thought. Of course, we'll celebrate this together next Sunday. It's a good thing to celebrate the life of St Matthew's. 120 years of ministry, of continuing faithful witness by the people of St Matthew's in Tamaki Makaurau. To honour the unique place and identity St Matthew's has in this city. But the Rollins parable presses in on this. Does the identity we've constructed enable us to discover our faith and live it out, as the parable articulates?

In the gospel today Matthew's response to Jesus' call is simple and immediate. Matthew hears and acts and, it would seem, steps into the costliness of discipleship that Jesus' actions around the dinner table reveal. The church we participate in today, has evolved to be the religious monolith we know. The church institution, it's structure and system, has become the

Jesus identity for those who hear the call now. These two things seem to stand in stark contrast one to the other.

The institutional mantle provides identity, certainty, security and protection. But has it come to prevent us from discovering faith that leads us to enact mercy, not sacrifice, compassion not condemnation, humility not hubris, inside and outside the walls?

Perhaps thankfully, Jesus' call is to the sick, to sinners, not the righteous. The disoriented, who need reorienting, who need to go and learn "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" are called. In accepting our call, do we accept the sick, sinner, not righteous, not aligned with life bringing ways identity? Ironically, accepting this honest truth about ourselves may free us from our constructed identity of impervious self-reliance. Open us to see and to receive our unique identity divinely loved into being as we are. It may just be, being willing to engage in a process of stripping back, away all we presume, all the constructs by which we justify our way of being and living, will release faith/trust to live in ways that bring life. Faith that does differently, faith that reveals/names injustice **and** acts so justice is granted, for all of creation. Do we **actually** want this?