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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“From Outcast to Evangelist”

Text: Matthew 9:9-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

His real, given name was Levi. That venerable Jewish name; the tribe of Israel from whom priests and temple servants were taken. But he was *called* Matthew. In the story of his call in Mark and Luke, the name Levi is still used; it is only Matthew himself that does not use it. Why? Did he consider himself unworthy of such an exalted name? Unworthy, since he did not serve his people but the Romans by serving as a tax collector? In that role his fellow Jews considered him a traitor of the worst kind – a sinner to be lumped together in the category of prostitutes and gentiles. Such was Matthew’s life – not a Roman to the Romans and not a Jew to the Jews. A man without a country.

Until Jesus came along that day. Jesus looked into that tax booth and saw not a Matthew, but a Levi. He saw not a tax collector, but a lost sheep He had come to seek and to save. He saw a man who from this day forward would no longer *take* taxes from people, but who would now *give* them the Word of God both as an apostle and an evangelist. And so that day in Capernaum, Jesus (perhaps) got in line at the tax booth, and waited His turn. He watched the people paying their taxes. He watched as Matthew took the money and signed the receipts. And when His turn came at the front of the line, He looked at this man with love and compassion, and gave Matthew not money, but a new life. “*Follow me,*” He said. I want you. Leave your old life, and follow me in a new life. A life as my disciple.

And the wonder of that day, *that anyone would want a man like Matthew*, was then matched by the next wonder: *Matthew did it!* And notice: Matthew doesn’t tell us he just “got up” – he uses a much more significant word: he says, He *rose!* For to Matthew, the words of Jesus that sounded forth that day were just as powerful and life-giving in calling a dead man from the tax office as when He called a dead Lazarus from the tomb! And so the tax booth was now closed. Matthew had a new treasure,

a greater treasure than money, to which he would now give his life. For he had a *Saviour*, who wanted him! A Saviour, who would give His life for him.

Well, it seems like news that the tax office had closed spread rather quickly, as Matthew's fellow tax collectors and other "equally-as-bad sinners" came his house to see what had gotten into Matthew. This was not normal behaviour for him! And they found out - as they came and met Jesus; as they came and reclined at the table with Him; as they came and were not chased away, but welcomed by Jesus! For He spoke *to* them, not *at* them. He spoke to them as people, not as the trash that many others considered them as. He spoke to them as He had spoken to Matthew, with life-giving and powerful words of repentance and forgiveness. . . . And when then Pharisees sneered and mocked at Him for keeping the company that He did, they heard those wonderful words of Jesus in reply: "*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" He was there *for them*. For sinners like Matthew. For sinners like us.

For you see, Matthew's "church" is a little picture of our church. Jesus is here in *this* house to be with us sinners and to feast us with His very body and blood. He is here to call us to repentance and to receive His forgiveness. He is here to raise us with His life-giving and powerful Word, that we stop living our old life, and follow Him in a new life. A life of discipleship. A life from the dead. . . . And the wonder here too is not just that Jesus would want folks like us - hypocrites, folks stuck in sin, doubting, struggling, falling, failing. The wonder that Jesus would want us *is matched by the fact that we're here!* That the Word of the Lord has raised us up and brought us here. It is not our doing. We could no more repent of our sin and wretchedness and choose Jesus than Matthew could. It is all the work of the Lord and His Spirit in your heart. The work of a Saviour who would come and die for you. The work of a God who demands not payment, but gives life.

For like Matthew, Jesus looks at you and sees what others - and maybe even you yourself - cannot see. Your job is not who you are. Your sin is not who you are. Your clothes or nationality are not who you are. For your Saviour looks at you and sees not a sinner or a worker, but a son or a daughter. A dearly loved child for whom He came to die; whom He wants to raise to a new life, clothe with His robe of righteousness, and make a citizen of the kingdom of Heaven. To give you what you do not have, and make you who you are not now. To do for you what He did for Abraham, Matthew, and wants to do for all people: welcome you to the banquet feast in *His* house, in Heaven. The life and feast that will have no end.

And so we gather here each week to be with our Saviour. Not as *the righteous*, but as *sinners*. As those who have failed this week. Falling into sins both new and old. Failing to help those around us. Serving ourselves instead of others, and expecting them to do the same. Not deserving of the high and honorable name of Christian: child of God. And yet Jesus says to you: *You are my child. I forgive you all your sins. I have washed you with the waters of resurrection. I feed you with the bread of Heaven, a foretaste of the feast to come that is waiting for you. And though there be those who sneer at us for being here, and mock the company we keep, here is where we know we need to be – with Matthew’s cronies, receiving life from the divine physician.*

Maybe that’s why Matthew used the name he did – that he be remembered as an outcast to magnify the grace of God.

And so it is with us. We confess our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness not to do something for God, but to magnify His grace and mercy which we here receive in His forgiveness. And that is why we forgive those who sin against us – not because they deserve it, but to magnify the forgiveness of the One who has forgiven us. That others in the world may look at us and wonder, *What’s gotten into Matthew?* **And the answer is that Christ has gotten into us!** His Spirit living in us, that the old life be done, and a new life begun. That we close our own sinful, selfish “tax offices,” where we expect others to come and pay us, and follow the One who came and paid the debt of our sin *for us* on the cross.

Matthew wrote a whole Gospel so that others would know what had gotten into Him. Or rather, *Who*. And God will use you as well, to publish the news of His grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. Not in the same way as Matthew, but in ways that you perhaps cannot even imagine – just as that tax collector in Capernaum that day never imagined God would write Scripture through Him. But such is the way of it with God in Christ Jesus, who calls tax collectors and eats with sinners; who reveals our sin in order to forgive our sin; who dies in order to make alive.

And again, maybe that’s why Matthew used the name he did. *He* was not the true Levi – no, Him he would now follow, and of Him he would now write. For **Jesus** was the true Levi, the priest of priests, who offered Himself on the altar of the cross, the once and for all sacrifice for the sin of the world. And after Him, no more “Levis” were needed; no more temples, no more priests, no more sacrifices. To follow Him, to point to Him, is enough. For it is by faith in Him that we are

righteous, that we are alive, that we are called Christians. A name of which we are not worthy – and yet *that* is what we are!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.