

Sermon preached at OCC, 11 June 2023

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer, Amen.*

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

### ***Following Jesus***

In Aesop's fables, there is a story about a hungry fox that found bunches of grapes on high branches of the vine. The fox tried to reach the grapes but to no avail. Getting tired, the fox left the grapes, muttering – 'the grapes must be too sour to eat.' It was a self-comforting skepticism rather than the truth, as we don't know if the grapes were sour or sweet unless we taste them. Is there any way for the fox to taste the grapes instead of self-comforting skepticism? We'll get back to this question at the end of the sermon. Today's theme is following Jesus – discipleship, which is like tasting the Kingdom of God with Jesus.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes discipleship as a journey with Jesus. He says, "... if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? We must go to him to answer this question, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy." Hence the title of his book in German is *Nachfolge*, literally 'Following after.' In today's reading, we see the same elements Bonhoeffer described through the call of Matthew. His journey with Jesus begins by leaving his old life behind; During this following, he becomes the first-hand eyewitness to Jesus' ministry and eventually evangelist of the good news of Jesus Christ. Thanks to his gospel, we also participate in this journey while tasting the Kingdom of God happening here and now.

### ***The call***

The call by Jesus for anyone entails self-empty, and Matthew is no exception. Known as Levi in Mark and Luke,<sup>1</sup> Matthew was a tax collector contracted by the Roman Empire to collect taxes from the Jews in Capernaum. Tax collectors were untrustworthy figures among his fellow Jews at the time. As such, tax collectors were a synonymous word for sinners. Jesus also

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-28

identified Matthew with sinners as he had come to call not the righteous but the sinners.<sup>2</sup> Since Jesus began his ministry, numerous people have come to Jesus not to follow him but to resolve their life issues. But for Matthew, Jesus came to him first and called Matthew to follow him. The next scene after this call is a great banquet at Matthew's house with a large crowd of tax collectors and sinners sitting at the table.<sup>3</sup> Back then, table fellowship had a significant meaning regarding social mores. In *Life in Kingdom: Meal as Symbol of Jesus' Mission*, the author Sarah Sasu states that table fellowship created a sense of union between guest and host. At the same time, it had the potential to create boundaries between those welcomed to the meal and those excluded.<sup>4</sup> Being in this banquet at Matthew's house, Jesus proclaimed his table fellowship as vital to his mission. The guests were also partaking in his mission and the meal by being accepted to the banquet. It also allowed Matthew to witness Jesus' ministry.

### ***Becoming an eyewitness and evangelist***

When we observe and experience something extraordinary, we may wish to retell what happened as they have affected our lives. As one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Matthew witnessed more of Jesus' life and ministry than almost anyone else - besides Peter, James, and John. In Matthew's gospel, we don't see his personal life, but Jesus. In addition, Matthew wrote his gospel for Jewish people who had become followers of Christ like himself. He wanted them to know that Jesus was the Messiah God had promised to send to save all people. For Matthew, Jesus was the fulfilment of everything said by the prophets in the Old Testament, too. Matthew described what this Messiah had brought to God's people through the Beatitudes. His gospel faithfully reported how Jesus told who will genuinely be blessed by God in the Kingdom and the attitudes and actions required for those who follow the new law Jesus brought. What are your favorite verses in the Beatitudes?<sup>5</sup> (...) Matthew's later life is unknown. Tradition relates that he became an evangelist and died as a martyr in a territory near present-day Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 9:12

<sup>3</sup> Luke 5:29

<sup>4</sup> James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 602.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:3-10 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy... to name a few.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-matthew-apostle-601>

### *Following Jesus Today*

In our story time, I retold the story based on the novel *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. The book is not about the actual alchemy or alchemist, but *Santiago* – the protagonist, underwent a process like alchemy as he became a new person entirely at the end of the novel. For Santiago, *the call* to find treasure came through a recurring dream he couldn't ignore further. When he decided to go to Egypt – to find a pyramid under which treasure was hidden, he had to leave his old life behind together with his beloved sheep. During this adventure, he met people, wise or stupid, young and old, kind or dangerous. He learned precious things from each person that helped him continue his journey. The moment to find the hidden treasure came when he was about to be killed by robbers near a pyramid. Robbers asked what he was doing there, and Santiago replied about his dream of a treasure buried at the base of the Pyramids. One of the robbers laughed at him, saying he had had the exact same dream, except that in his, the treasure was buried under an old church in Andalusia, Spain. Santiago realized that the treasure was back in Andalusia the entire time. Had Santiago remained in Andalusia, he couldn't find the truth of treasure under the church!

We began to explore following Jesus with Bonhoeffer's words about discipleship. Unless we begin our journey with Jesus, we'll never be his disciples nor find the truth. It's because discipleship involves actions – leaving our ways of life to follow Jesus' way. We, as a faith community, are doing many things involved in the wider community. We are passionate about bringing social justice, including housing, young people's well-being, intergenerational interactions, healing wounded hearts, caring for the weak and many more. Among all these, we shouldn't forget that all these are part of our experiences while following Jesus, not the destination. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end.

Following Jesus is also to know him intimately in our time and space. It compares to tasting ripened grapes. So what was your answer to the question – 'Is there any other way the fox can have grapes?' One of possible answers is that a generous farmer may leave a bunch of the sweetest grapes on a lower branch either by mistake or deliberately so that the fox may taste it! Like the fox and the grapes, Santiago, and Matthew, and Bonhoeffer, we do know that "it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy." Amen!