

Callings

Matthew 9:9-13 & Genesis 12:1-9

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Way back in the dark ages, the phone which was attached to the wall would ring. And we would just pick it up and say hello. Recklessly. Willy-nilly. We had no earthly idea who might be calling. We would give away so much information in the first ten seconds. Hello, Thompson residence, Monica speaking. Still without knowing who was calling! Some of you are likely to tell me after worship about a party line, where you were only supposed to pick up the phone if it was your ring. My point remains. You had no idea who was calling you. If the phone rang your ring, you rushed to answer it. You dropped whatever you were doing and answered the phone.

I don't do that anymore. If the phone rings, or dings, or beeps, I let it. If it's already right next to me, I'll glance at it to see who's calling. If it's my most frequent callers, "Spam Risk," "Unknown Caller," and "Telemarketer," I just silence it and let it ring. I've been known to say, "I can't talk to you right now," out loud and send a call to voicemail. Not to any of you, of course, but to other people. If the phone isn't right next to me, and I'm not expecting a call from anyone, I let it ring, or ding, or beep. I'll look at it later.

Jesus calling Matthew as his disciple is really not much like a phone call. But I do want us to think about if Matthew knew Jesus before this encounter, and what difference that might have made in how things proceeded. The gospel doesn't say one way or another.

It's a short encounter, quite short. Jesus is walking down the road and sees a man named Matthew sitting in the toll booth. That tells you quite a bit about Matthew already. The particulars of how the toll booth worked aren't clear exactly—it seems that if you were transporting goods from one location to another, you had to stop and pay a tax. Possibly even if you weren't transporting goods, just using the road, like a toll road. Matthew's job was to collect the toll. However, everybody knew—everyone knew—that there was rampant corruption and blatant bribery going on in this toll collection business. At the very least, the tax collectors were all aligned with the Roman Empire, the occupiers, the oppressors. They passed along at least some of those tolls to Rome, who then used the money to find new and more painful ways to oppress the people and fund their expanding empire. "Tax collector" was virtually a synonym for "sinner."

So we know already who Matthew is. Not well liked, ostracized, judged, probably deserved to be judged. A sinner, a universally despised sinner.

Jesus says to Matthew, “Follow me.” It was just that abrupt—it’s a command, grammatically. And Matthew got up and followed him.

Now, that raises the question for me. Did Matthew know Jesus, or know *about* Jesus, already? If “Jesus, Messiah, Savior of the World” had shown up on his cell phone screen, would he have answered it or let it go to voicemail? It’s way more serious than that, of course, but if we’re going to take Matthew as an example of faith, then I think we want to entertain both possibilities: that he knew Jesus, or had heard of Jesus AND that Jesus was a stranger to him. It’s pretty remarkable, if Jesus was a complete stranger, for Matthew to get up and leave his job and follow a stranger. He must not have been very attached to the position. He walks away from the toll booth, and he’ll never go back. If, however, he had heard about Jesus, heard about the Sermon on the Mount and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” or “blessed are the poor in spirit.” If he had heard about healings and exorcisms. Then maybe it was a little easier to drop everything and follow Jesus. Maybe this wasn’t the first time Jesus had dropped by the toll booth. Maybe they’d had a conversation before, and this is the follow up. There’s of course no way to know, but letting those options rumble around opens up the story a bit.

What comes next is also a little ambiguous. Jesus, we’re told, sits at dinner at “the house.” Presumably, it’s Matthew’s house. The other guests make that more likely—along with Jesus and the disciples, there are tax collectors and sinners. Of course, that’s who Matthew would know. They’re his friends. He has left his toll booth behind to follow Jesus, but he stays friends and wants them to meet the person who is now his teacher. And wants Jesus to meet his friends. Maybe they, too, will be compelled to follow.

The Pharisees raise a stink, acting as if the sin of tax collectors and more generic sinners is somehow infecting Jesus and the disciples. Jesus responds with “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Why wouldn’t he be hanging out with sinners? They need him, and they know they need him.

The calling to Matthew seems abrupt and out of the blue, and maybe it is. Matthew’s decision to follow Jesus seems quick, too. But he does so wholeheartedly, and fully, and wants to include other people, too. Other than appearing in lists of the twelve disciples, this is the last place Matthew shows up by name.

Matthew wasn't the first person, of course, to be called by God, out of the blue. It happens to Abram and Sarai in the Genesis reading today. They've been introduced at the end of chapter 11, but it doesn't say much. They're married, and Sarai is barren. The narrator then says that they head out with Abram's father to Canaan but stop before they get there and settle in Haran. That's all. God calls Abram out of nowhere and tells him to go. Leave your country and your family to a place that I will show you. Then God promises that Abram will be a great nation, and through him all the families on earth will be blessed. And Genesis tells us, "Abram went."

Jesus tells Matthew—follow me. God tells Abram—Go. Matthew gets up and follows. Abram gets up and goes. They each leave behind something—Matthew his profession and security and sin. Abram his land and home and tribe. And they each go somewhere that they don't know where is yet. They follow someone that they don't fully know yet. It's all quite risky and unplanned and precarious, at least for my taste.

For those of us who have been followers of Jesus for many years, or at least been trying to follow Jesus for many years, what can we learn from Matthew and Abram? Precisely that risk. I don't want to say that, because it's so hard for me, but I think it's true. We're being called to leave something behind in order to follow. Matthew didn't abandon his friends. Abram traveled with some of his family. So they aren't saying we have to leave everyone behind, but following Jesus is a risk. A worthwhile risk, but no less dangerous. Let's think about that. What might God be calling us to leave behind, and where might God be calling us to go? Matthew went. Abram went. Let's follow where God is calling us.