

**SERMON- Proper 5 (A)**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

Genesis 12:1-9

Psalms 33:1-12

Romans 4:13-25

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**  
**June 11, 2023**

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

**OPENING:**

Pictured on the front of your bulletin is Caravaggio's famous "The Calling of St. Matthew."

I'd like you have it out now while I give my sermon so that we can look at that disciple together, and later, we will look at the pictures of a few other disciples whose pictures are printed later in your bulletin.

We just heard the "Calling of Matthew" as our Gospel reading, and now that we are into Ordinary Time, we will be hearing from Matthew for the rest of the church year, which is Year A.

Now when we started this Church Year, Year A, the Year of Matthew, I admitted that Matthew was not my favorite Gospel, instead it was Mark, Year B.

After I did this, I realized I had made a rookie mistake, because I had some folks come up to me who had named THEIR children "Matthew"—Matthew Lammers and Matthew Dopsovic, and we also have Matthew Bate and Matthew Gjormand. In addition, we have Matt Schumann, who we were trying to get to run for vestry at the time that I made that comment.

The "Matthews" seem to unite, coming to me, and reminding me that their name means "Gift from God"

That just so happens to be the deep theological lesson in this story, that Faith is a "Gift from God." Matthew simply follows Jesus. He's not gifted internally, not somehow predisposed by his own talents to follow. He has not been working on his spirituality, steadily plugging away at his religiosity. He simply follows Jesus. In fact, as a tax collector, he had none of the qualifications for discipleship and yet received the unwarranted gift, and nothing was the same after.

**PAINTING**

But to the painting, Jesus is on the very right, he somehow has dressed himself in Renaissance-era clothing despite living in the 1<sup>st</sup> century (!) with Peter next to him. They have entered into this "booth", the place of the despised tax collectors, where those at the table are those collaborating with the Roman Empire and were known to skim a little off the top for themselves.

The painting is as immediate and direct as our Gospel reading, Jesus points and Matthew has to react. (Follow with me,) reading right to left, you have Jesus' hand pointing this way and his finger directing your eye past this young boy through the middle. And the light, the shadow, helps follow the line down to "Matthew" with the beard.

What was Matthew thinking at that moment? What was going through his mind? What about his psychology made this "call" successful? We want a backstory, an origin story, but we don't get much one.

Instead we get a call and an answer.

And the answer is a "gift of God": the gift being the evangelist Matthew himself and the Gospel book itself.

### **MATTHEW:**

This story is only in Matthew's Gospel, and the thinking is that this is the way that Matthew, the writer of the Gospel, established his authorship and his authority. This is his way of saying: "I know this story to be true because it happened and it happened to me." Jesus' words and his ministry about where he goes to save sinners and outcasts and prostitutes—you can know that happened because Matthew himself was in that number and he had gone on that journey himself.

The name "Matthew" offers another clue in that shares a connection with the word for "Disciples"—the Greek being *mathetes*.

All throughout the Book of Matthew, there is this focus on the Disciples as a group and what that process of discipleship means.

Matthew cares deeply about how Jesus crafted this ragtag band of fishermen and a tax collector into this thing called a Church. For him, it's important for *us* to understand how the qualifications for signing up for that process are basically nothing, less than nothing (in fact) in Matthew's case, and the discipling process is so amazing that he decided to write a book about it.

So, he drops this little bread crumb as if to say: being a disciple is this great gift from God. *Mathetes* to Matthew.

### **IDENTITY:**

Now here's the part where I do have to remind that none of the Gospels had names attached to them. They were all anonymous. 'Matthew'/'Mark'/'Luke' and 'John' were all names that the church gave to them after the fact.

The reason for the 1<sup>st</sup> Gospel getting the name “Matthew” comes from our scene. In the other gospels, it’s someone named “Levi” who is the tax collector .... The thinking here is that Matthew changed it because **he** was Levi, and Jesus gave him the name Matthew in this scene. Like so many other stories from the Bible, when you have an encounter with the Living God, your name changes because your whole identity changes. You were one thing before:  
a tax-collector named Levi, and then you become another after you meet Jesus, Matthew, the disciple, the 1<sup>st</sup> Evangelist.

That’s what happened to Abraham, to St. Peter, to Martin Luther King, on and on.

Today we have two Baptisms at our 10 AM service, and in the Episcopal Church we don’t lean quite as heavily into that sense of you getting a new name at your baptism like the Roman Catholics do. Parents name their child and those names are already from God.

But there is still that sense that as you are welcomed into a family as a child of God, that you are clothed in this new identity, with water and the Holy Spirit, and that your Christian life begins at that moment.

Today we will welcome no Matthews, but rather an ‘Isaac’, who in the Bible was the son of Abraham and who we know as the classic Old Testament figure who embodies this idea of faith as a gift from God. Abraham could not stop messing up through half the book of Genesis, but he kept his faith in God, to the point that he finally had a son named Isaac, whose name means “laughter” because it was that funny that’s the way it turned. Isaac would be the ancestor of God’s people, the people of Israel.

We will also welcome a ‘Ryleigh’ whose name I cannot do that much with, but her middle name is ‘Grace’, and that’s all we are talking about today.

Grace is the opposite of achievement, it’s God’s unconditional love for us despite all notions to the contrary.

It’s God choosing us and loving us despite our lack of promise.

### **FAITH:**

The painting has that same idea, Jesus enters the room and calls Matthew, follow that line again to ‘Matthew’ who is in charge of this booth, where he has the great human response to God’s call:

“Me?” he seems to say, pointing to himself.

“How could you possibly want me?”

“I am too flawed, too corrupted, too whatever.”

But look a little bit closer. Now I am not an art historian but notice how THAT man’s finger points across his chest, potentially at himself, OR potentially to his right, to our left, and therefore the line continues across the scene to the figure on the very left. The younger, clean-shaven man with head down looking at his shekels, not even deigning to meet the gaze of his Lord and Savior. Maybe **that’s** “Matthew”—maybe that’s the author of this Gospel.

If so, what a portrait of discipleship and of call and of vocation. The self-portrait is so devastatingly honest, so downward looking and sad.

Jesus is in his midst and all he can look at is the coins on the table.

What have you felt when God points to you in your life?

Most of us say “Who me?” or try to avert the gaze.

The good news is that God’s call is so irresistible. God creates something out of nothing. Jesus’ gaze is so alluring that we don’t have to clean up the house before the maid arrives, or work out a bunch before we start our membership at the gym. That’s now how discipleship works.

Rather Faith is a gift of God, a gracious one and an unmerited one

## **CONCLUSION**

Today we say hello to two new disciples, two who have answered the call.

We also say goodbye to three “old” disciples. Our pictures from the Church Directory are not quite Caravaggio but we know Hector & Les and Robin as 3-dimensional figures with depth and character and faithfulness to this church.

We will do a proper departing prayer later on where we pledge that our love for them will follow them as they go on to the next chapter in their lives.

Contemplating their departure , I have felt a little like Matthew, staring down, not wanting to come to terms with it, fidgeting and trying not to face God calling them into a new thing.

But I also know I need hear Christ’s summons for them to be disciples elsewhere and so, like Matthew, understand that they have been a gift to us from God, and they will be a gift to the church family that they end up with.

**AMEN**