

⁹ *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.*

¹⁰ *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

¹² *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13)*

Follow Jesus!

Today is the most unusual confirmation in our congregation's recent history. The date is really late this year and we usually have many more people here on Confirmation Sunday. And we're livestreaming confirmation for the first time ever. But, of course, it's the reason we're doing all those things that makes this so different. We share that with every graduation or wedding or funeral of the last three or four months. COVID has affected everything. But confirmation is still happening. And these three young men will stand up here and make the most important promises of their lives. They will confess their faith in Christ and their Lutheran understanding of God's Word. They will promise God that they will live according to his word and that they will come to church and to communion regularly for the rest of their lives. They will swear that they will die rather than fall away from all that God has taught them. Those are not light promises nor should they be easily made. Our gospel lesson for today summarizes all those promises with a simple command that Jesus gave to the disciple Matthew. To him and to all of us gathered here today, and especially to you three young men, Jesus says, **Follow me!**

I.

Matthew – the man who wrote this gospel – was a tax collector. Jesus saw him there working at the tax collector's booth and he said simply, "Follow me." And Matthew did. Tax collectors were not popular people in Israel. They worked for the Romans, so they were considered to be the enemy. They made money by taking a commission of the taxes they collected – and in a world where most people couldn't read and legal documents were not on computers or even in file drawers, it was easy to charge more than someone owed and to pocket the difference. Not only did that make people hate them, it made it easy to dismiss them as sinners on the same level with prostitutes and other criminals.

But even tax collectors and sinners still wanted to have friends, so they hung out with other tax collectors and sinners. When Jesus called Matthew to leave his old life behind and become a disciple, Matthew invited his friends to his home for what was probably a going away party. So, of course, the only invited guests – besides Jesus and those disciples who had already joined him – were tax collectors and sinners. That caused a scandal. The Pharisees disapproved. The Pharisees were respectable people. They went to church. They studied the Old Testament laws and worked hard to follow them. They asked Jesus' disciples, **"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"** Jesus was a rabbi. You know the old saying, "You're known by the company you keep." If Jesus was going to hang out with sinners, people were going to start assuming he was a sinner.

They said this to the disciples. But of course, they wanted Jesus to hear it. He answered them directly: **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** Now, obviously, today, sometimes we do go to the doctor even when we aren't sick. But the concept of preventative medicine didn't really exist in Jesus' day. You sent for a doctor if your leg was broken or if you had a fever. Of course, Jesus wasn't really talking about sick people. He explained that by saying, **"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** So, of course, he was eating with sinners. Where else would he be? Jesus did not defend the sins of the tax collectors. He did not deny that they deserved God's punishment. He just loved them enough to reach out to call them to repentance. And shame on the Pharisees for sticking their noses up in the air and not caring about those souls who needed saving.

But there's a deeper point here: Jesus came to call sinners to repent. And that included the Pharisees. They were spiritually sick and dying and they needed Jesus, the great healer of souls, to rescue them. Jesus

wanted them to see that. He loved the Pharisees. He wanted them to go to heaven. He was going to die for them along with everybody else. But they missed the point. Their hearts were so hard that all they could do was grumble that Jesus didn't conduct himself the way they thought he should.

What does this tell us on confirmation day? Obviously, our three confirmands have not been living in open sin the way the tax collectors were. Now, if anyone here today has lived that kind of sinful lifestyle, Jesus' love for the tax collectors and sinners means that he loves you, too. But how many thirteen-year-olds have lived that kind of sinful life? How many church going people have actually had to come back from that kind of lifestyle? The truth is, most of us probably live lives that are much more similar to the lives of the Pharisees. We go to church. We try to live the way God commands us to. We probably think of ourselves as people who are decent and honest. We're the good people.

And those are the people Jesus slammed. Why? Because people who live like that often come to believe that we're going to heaven because we're such good guys. God chose us because he saw that we would be good Lutherans, or because God saw that we would believe him if he brought the gospel to us, or because God saw how much we would do for the church. Do you see what that makes us? People who earn their way to heaven. So it means that we can come here, to this spiritual hospital, Sunday after Sunday, but we stay in the waiting room, because we aren't coming to Jesus to be healed. We aren't coming to Jesus to have our sins taken away. We're coming to check one more box on our list of good works that we think God needs to remember on Judgment Day.

The sin of the Pharisees was pride. To God, that sin was every bit as terrible as those tax collectors getting rich by overcharging people on their taxes. Pride is the heart of human sin. It's why we get so angry when people hurt us and why it's so hard to forgive. It's why we struggle to admit when we're wrong. Pride drives us to treat other people badly so that we feel good about ourselves. Pride lies to us and makes us think that we're the kind of people Jesus should want in his church. Worst of all, pride destroys faith. Faith is trusting that all my sins are forgiven because of Jesus. But pride says that I don't have any sins, at least no big ones. I make mistakes. I do the best I can and sometimes it doesn't work out. I mess up sometimes. But sin is what bad people do, and that's just not me. And the end result is hell. Because you can't trust in Jesus until you see your sin and your need for a Savior.

Jesus slammed the Pharisees because they needed to hear the law. Jesus ate with the tax collectors because they needed to hear that God forgave them. But Jesus loved them both. And he lived a life of perfect, humble love they all needed. He never committed the open sins of the tax collectors or the secret sins of the Pharisees. He was perfect in his heart and perfect in his life. And he did that so that God could count all those tax collectors and Pharisees as perfect. And so that God could count us as perfect, too. Jesus died and paid for all the pride in their heart and in ours. For all the sins that our pride causes us to commit. For all the wicked things we've done and said and for all the superior thoughts we've had about ourselves. He paid for it and washed it all away. And he rose to tell us that. He rose to come to us with the gospel and promise us eternal life. Today is Confirmation Day. Today, Jesus says to you three young men: **"Follow me. Recognize that you need a doctor!** Then trust that I, and I alone, have healed you."

II.

That's how he called Matthew. When I was a child these stories of Jesus calling his disciples always gave me the impression that Mathew or John or Peter were just at work one day when this stranger walked up and said, "Follow me" and they just quit their jobs and left. Did Jesus do some kind of miracle to convince them? He did, but not like I was thinking as a child. It was the miracle of faith. We actually have clear references to Peter and John meeting Jesus before he called them. With Matthew, we don't. But we have to see him in that same light. It would nice if the Holy Spirit had led Matthew to give us a little more detail. But I think we can put together a fairly reasonable scenario.

Matthew was Jewish. He may not have been raised in a really observant home, since he became a tax collector, but he would've gone to synagogue and maybe the temple as a boy. He would've participated in Jewish rituals and practices, so he would've absorbed a Jewish religious perspective. But once he became a tax collector, he probably got sucked into that life of corruption and cheating. Matthew probably did pretty well financially. But something wasn't right. Maybe he remembered the lessons of his youth and felt guilty. Maybe it was only after he heard the preaching of Jesus, the rabbi who ate with tax collectors and sinners, that he began to question his life choices. But we can be fairly certain that he recognized the sin in his own life. And the

gospel Jesus proclaimed touched him so deeply that all Jesus had to do was say two words, and Matthew quit his job and left his comfortable life behind.

That had to be a big change. Matthew was going to spend the next three years wandering with Jesus and living off the charity of others. Even after Jesus ascended, Matthew didn't go back to the comfortable life he had lived before. He was an apostle, appointed by God to found the New Testament Church. Why make all those changes? It would be possible for a person to do all those things out of pride: "See how much I've given up for Jesus!" But that's not the response of faith. Jesus called Matthew to become a teacher and a missionary. The only explanation that makes sense is that Matthew heard the good news that he was forgiven and that changed him. He had to leave his old life behind.

I hope and pray that none of our confirmands ever has to wrestle with their consciences like Matthew might have. But I also hope and pray that the gospel means as much to us as it did to him. We are sinners. But Jesus loves us. He doesn't care how bad we've been. He doesn't care how bad we're going to be. He knows every sin we are still going to commit – and he loves us anyway. He came to us personally with the gospel and he give us faith. Now he invites us to follow him. That doesn't mean that we have to quit our jobs and leave everything behind. It doesn't mean that these young people shouldn't go to college. But it does mean that we need to spend the rest of our lives following our confirmation vows – that is, living for Jesus who loves us and who died and rose for us. We belong to him.

Whether God calls us to stand up here, or in the front of a Lutheran school classroom, or to participate in his work as lay people, all our lives belong to him. We say thank you by being good and faithful spouses. We say thank you by being obedient children and loving parents. We say thank you by being good workers and good neighbors and good citizens. We say thank you by being a part of our church's work. And I hope that all three of you young men will think about becoming pastors or teachers some day. But that's not a requirement. Jesus calls you to follow him. Trust in him. And hear his word. And serve him.

This is not our normal weekend for confirmation. You three young men have had your whole lives disrupted by COVID. But don't you think that the people who lived during World War I or II had their lives disrupted? Don't you think that all those Lutherans who were confirmed during the Great Depression remembered how that made their confirmations different? Of course they did. Our circumstances are unusual. But the promises you will make now are the same as the promises last year's confirmands made and the ones from the year before that. They're the same basic promises that I made more than forty years ago. They are promises to serve the Lord and follow him until he brings you home to heaven. Come forward, and make those promises now. Amen.