



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Feast of Saint Matthew  
Sunday September 22, 2013 – Trinity 17

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“and He saw Matthew sitting at the receipt of custom and called him”

Matthew, who is also called Levi, was a very unlikely candidate to become an Apostle. The Gospel innocuously records him as “sitting at the receipt of custom” when Jesus calls him to become a disciple. That sounds quite innocent to our ears, but, in fact, it was not innocent at all.

The “custom” Levi oversaw was tax. The simple truth was that he was a tax collector. While it is hard for us to be sympathetic to the tax man, the less simple and less innocent understanding of Matthew’s position comes from the context of Roman occupation of Jerusalem. Matthew wasn’t a simple revenue agent. He wasn’t collecting tithe or tax for the benefit of the Jews, but was the agent of the Romans for collecting the spoil of their conquest.

The Romans, like many of the conquering empires before them, exacted “tribute” from the peoples they conquered. That tribute was a punitive fine that paid the salaries of the soldiers and officials that were in charge of imposing the empire on the conquered. The excess, above the cost of paying the fees for the force that enslaved them, went to fatten the coffers of the Emperor and fund the extravagances of Rome.

In fact, to the eyes of his fellow Jews, Matthew was a traitor. While the whole of Israel chafed under the imposition of Rome’s will, Matthew and his fellow Publicans went to work for the enemy. Worse yet, the work they did for the enemy was to shake down their own people, extorting their profits and their living from them for the benefit of the occupying force, and doing so with the benefit of Roman swords behind them to back up their efforts like the thug squads that follow the protection racketeers, always threatening, always oppressive.

And yet, with all that color, we still don’t approach an understanding of how deeply these Publicans were hated. You see, the payment for being a traitor, for collecting money from the Jews for the people who afflicted them, was that the tax collectors got to use the goon squads for their own extortion. Insult to injury, whatever the Publican could squeeze out of their countryman above what the Romans demanded was their salary and bonus.

Publicans were traitors and profiteers, abetting the enemy and living off the extortion of their own people for financial gain. The closest we can imagine in our own time would be the Jewish bankers of Switzerland that stored the Nazi riches that were the confiscated possessions of their fellow Jews throughout the holocaust. The Publicans were justly despised, truly earning the hatred of their countrymen.

It is one of these people that Jesus calls to be His follower, the lowest of the low, the most despicable and hated traitor. The Pharisees were

scandalized and offended to find Jesus at feast, partying, with his now convert, the Publican Matthew. In the hindsight of history, we have developed disdain for the Pharisees. After all, we know Jesus to be Our Lord, and the Pharisees opposed Him. But the Pharisees were actually us. They were the good church-going people of their time. They were community leaders and role models. They compromised with the Roman occupation for the benefit of their people.

When **Jairus** unintentionally prophesizes that by crucifying Jesus, it is right that one man die for the benefit of many, he isn't uttering murderous spite. He was rightfully fearful that Jesus would stir a revolution against the Romans by claiming to be the Messiah, and he was righteously sacrificing Jesus to keep the insurrection from leading into a slaughter of Jews by the Roman guard. The Pharisees were a lot more like us than we care to realize, and yet, when they are outraged to find Jesus at a feast thrown by Matthew, they are the ones who are rebuked. **"I am come to save those that are sick, not those who need not a physician."**

So why does Jesus rebuke the Good people, and embrace this reprobate? The answer is simple, the good church going people that should have recognized Him as the Messiah, by the signs and miracles He performed, rejected Jesus. The reprobate, traitor tax collector embraces Him, changes his life, forsakes the comfort of his living, and gives everything He has over to the Lord. Because the Lord receives Him, Matthew becomes not only an Apostle, but a great Evangelist. Through the kindness done in receiving this pitiful sinner, the Gospel was brought first to the Jews and Palestinians of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but ultimately, to the world. The very last man we would have considered to be a Christian model, becomes the very first person through which most Christians encounter the Good News through his Gospel.

Which leads us to the question, what does this encounter mean to us, the good church going people of the New Covenant? It is a warning to us that we have to learn from the sad lesson of the Church going people of the Old Covenant. Do we have the faith of Matthew, to leave the promises of this world to embrace the sacrifices that lead us to joy in the next, or are we making deals with the culture of sin and pride that embraces our world. Are we making choices that are expedient instead of choices that are merciful and kind? Are we doctors and nurses staffing a hospital for the broken, weak and despised,

or are we guarding the door to our church, looking to embrace those who are like us in income and stature more than those who are like us because they are sinners, broken and in need of redeeming as much as we are.

I have told as many of you as have asked, that my sermons are written for my own benefit. I certainly don't question the heart of St Stephen's. You know I admire, love and am privileged to be in this parish which epitomizes love and service more than any I have been associated with. With all my heart, I am encouraged and made joyful by the love that flows from this community.

For myself though, I do have to ask the question. Am I doing all I should to be a physician for Christ, a healer of the broken and unfortunate. Do I close the doors of my heart, even a little, when I see someone that makes me uncomfortable, someone who will be messy to deal with. Am I embracing everyone the Lord gives me to as a minister, or am I picking and choosing through the crowd, taking home only the people that make me comfortable. In my heart, a Pharisee is always lurking, and this Gospel reminds me that I must be vigilant against his occupation, not bartering with him, but rejecting Him. Maybe you can empathize with me, and take the opportunity to examine even our good hearts, that the light of Jesus chases away the shadow of the Pharisee in our lives.

A few weeks ago, I asked you to bring your anxieties to the altar and leave them there, taking the gift of peace that is returned to us for our offering. This week I invite you to bring our petty prejudices and quick judgment to the altar, and instead embrace the gift of healing the Lord has given us to share with the people He brings into our lives, the ones that make us uneasy and uncomfortable, but the ones He wants us to love and care for. Maybe, be imitating Jesus in His willingness to accept the unwanted, we will be the conduit to empowering a great evangelist for the times to come. Jesus did it through Matthew, the tax collector, extortioner and traitor, he can certainly do it through us.

***In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen***