

Get up and follow

St. Matthew's Day; Thursday, September 21, 2023 (Year A)

Proverbs 3:1-6; Psalm 119:33-40;

2 Timothy 3: 14-17; Matthew 9:9-13

The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler; St. Matthew's Sunbury;
Priest in Charge

In the name of God- Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.

I stumbled across a quote this week that really resonated with me- it is from the book "The Horse and his Boy", the fifth book in the Chronicles of Narnia. One of the main characters is trying to take advantage of the divine knowledge of Aslan, the Lion who is the Christ-figure in these stories and is asking for intimate details from the stories of other people, and Aslan answers like this: "*Child, I am telling you your story, not hers.*

No one is told any story but their own."

Here at St. Matthew's, we deeply believe in the power of our own stories- listening for and living into what they teach us about where we have come from and

where we are going, and where God is present in them. And when we hear and study the stories of scripture, we are listening for what our own call to follow our Lord may look like, how the examples of those who have gone before us- like Matthew- can guide us on our own journeys. Tonight, even though Aslan says we can never really do it, I am going to tell someone else's story: by retelling the Gospel account of Matthew's conversion as if he were speaking to us in the first person- as if he suddenly showed up here in our sanctuary and was talking to us all these centuries later. I truly believe this will help his example of following Jesus to come more powerfully alive for us as we gather in our beloved church that bears his name.

“I know there are things you have heard about me, and there is also a lot that you do not know about my life, that I don't think you need to know. I say it like this because really, when all is said and done, the only thing

that matters is in some small way my own story points towards the One named Jesus who called me to follow him. He invites all of us to get up from whatever we are doing- to leave our old ways of doing things behind- to accept his gifts of healing and wholeness and share them with everyone we meet. Your stories will be very different than mine because we are different people, but most importantly, if Jesus can call me than none of us are too broken- our lives too worthless in the eyes of ourselves or others- for Jesus to call us to follow him.

At first it seemed like any ordinary day. I was sitting, as I always do, in my tax collection booth along the road that goes by the Sea of Galilee, near the town of Capernaum. This was a great place to set up shop, because it's a busy road and being near the sea, fisherman- as well as lots of other people, like merchants- were always going back and forth. Being a tax collector meant I could demand these people pay taxes for anything

you could think of- oh, there was no end of the tax money we could get out of people! There was a tax for transporting the fish you'd caught, or any other goods you might have with you, and even one just for traveling on the road itself. And here is the worst part- as a tax collector, I could demand people pay me in excess of what these taxes really were and keep the rest for myself- line my own pockets, as the expression goes. No one was watching over us- as long as the Roman Empire got their portion, we could do pretty much as we liked. And people didn't really have a choice- if they wanted to keep on traveling down that road and sell the goods they had with them, they'd have to pay up.

As you can imagine, the people being forced to pay all those taxes HATED everything about it- not only the Roman overlords oppressing them and keeping them in bondage, but especially they hated the tax collectors, because we were siding with the empire. Being a Jewish

man doing this despicable job made me an outcast among my neighbors- tax collectors couldn't even go in the synagogue because we were considered ritually unclean under Jewish law. We were financially well off, that's true, through getting money in this shady way- we had the biggest houses and the finest of everything money could buy- but we were shunned by our family and friends, lonely in a society that was poor in material things but rich in the bonds of community, left with only our fellow tax collectors and other so-called 'lowlives' for company.

I had seen Jesus before this day that changed the course of my life, because he was around that area a lot, traveling up and down the road- it was an important place of doing ministry for him. If you've ever had any experience yourself with hearing Jesus call you to something, you'll know what I mean- it's really hard to put it into words- plus I wasn't expecting it. Remember, no one of any standing in society even talked to me, at

least not if they can help it. But Jesus comes over to where I'm sitting at my desk, and he just says, "Follow me." *And the most amazing thing is- I do.* I just get up and I leave behind all my tax collecting stuff (it didn't really hit me until later that I left behind way more than the physical stuff- I also left behind my former life of cheating my neighbors out of their hard-earned money) ...and I follow Jesus... and my life was never the same again. He even comes to a dinner in my house, with a whole bunch of other tax collectors too, and it doesn't bother him at all. In fact, he even defended us to the Pharisees, saying he had come to be in relationship with people just like us- people who don't think we know it all, people who were missing something to make us whole until Jesus called us to follow him, bringing healing to our bodies or our souls or most likely both, bringing us back into being part of the community when everyone else thought we weren't good enough for that.

This is why I said before that the things you don't know about me don't really matter- like how I ended up being a tax collector in the first place, or how long I was observing Jesus from behind my booth before he called me, or everything that happened to me after I got up and followed Jesus- and believe me, truly following Jesus is never easy or safe or comfortable, and sometimes your very life is at stake. What does matter though, is how my story is an example. If Jesus can call me, considered the lowest of the low in that culture because I was a tax collector, then there is no one who is beyond the reach of Jesus' call to serve the kingdom and to witness by the power of their own story. When I got up and followed him, I had to leave behind **everything**- **as will you**- that was holding me back from a new life: a life formed from the truth and healing of Jesus' teachings- from being in close relationship with him- even from the hardships I experienced for the sake of proclaiming the gospel. Do not be discouraged if your story looks different than mine

but do *pay attention*- because you don't know when this call will come or what it will look like. And really, all that matters is that you get up and follow- everything after that is your own story to tell. Only you can tell in a way that points back to the One who has called you to live it and to share it.

May it ever be so. Amen.