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Matthew, Matriculation, and Ministry¹

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**Texts: Proverbs 8:22–9:6, 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2,
Matthew 9:9–13**

“Jesus saw a man sitting at the tax collections place called Matthew and said to him: ‘Follow me.’ And he stood up and followed him” (Matthew 9:9).

For anyone who has struggled with the call to ministry, who has painstakingly investigated every angle, who has experienced the euphoria and doubt, the contentment and despair, the confidence and upheaval that accompany what one thinks is a call by God, this passage is too far-fetched to be any adequate approximation of reality. And so it is, unless we understand that the space between Jesus’ command and Matthew’s response—between “follow me” and “he followed him”—is a space into which we must place the entire Gospel according to Matthew. We get a glimpse of why this is the case when Jesus later in this episode responds to the Pharisees by saying, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13).

So, to fill in the space. Jesus said to Matthew “Follow me.” And Matthew before he stood up and followed him asked, “Why?” Jesus said to him, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcing its way forward and people of violence are trying to plunder it. Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

“Have you understood all this?”

Matthew said to him, "Yes."

And Jesus said to Matthew, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who has abundant resources to meet any need. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. And, truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. For behold, I am with you always."

And Matthew stood up and followed him. (Matthew 9:9-13, 11:12, 7:21, 13:51-52, 18:20, 25:40, 28:20.)

As a theologian, Matthew is one who thinks about what he is doing, and in his gospel he urges us as Christians to do the same. Like the wise author of Proverbs, Matthew encourages us to "walk in the way of insight" (Proverbs 9:6) so that the one who is found by Christ, finds life. As a concerned church worker and leader, Matthew is one who knows that a larger circle than just his immediate friends will be and must be influenced by his acts, and reminds us as Christians that this is necessarily the case for us also. Like Paul, Matthew understands what being entrusted with the "ministry and message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19) is all about.

Matthew, customs tax collector, apostle, author, disciple presents us with a Jesus and a gospel in which the absoluteness of the claims of the call to us is maddening: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away;... if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away..." (5:29-30). "Anyone who is angry with a sister or a brother shall be liable to judgement..." (5:22). "Love your enemies..." (5:44). It is a gospel where human inadequacies are mercilessly and fully recognized. And yet it is a gospel where the urgency of the demand is determined not by the content of the demand, but by the nearness of grace. In that space between call and following, the world has changed and is infused with the presence of Jesus. Where two or three gather to worship, there is the presence of Jesus. Where the needs of hunger, poverty, privation, and injustice are met, where the least of human beings are treated with full dignity and care, there is Jesus. Where the good news is spoken and enacted, there the promise of Jesus is once again actualized, "I am with you always."

Followers, disciples, are those who understand this mystery of the kingdom of heaven, its unconditional conditions, its imminence, its irruption. In this sense the dignity of discipleship

is the dignity of the learner. "Go and learn" (9:13) Jesus tells those who question the call he has extended to Matthew and those like him.

Here now is an analogy for our life of discipleship at the seminary. Discipleship is like enrolling, matriculating, and remaining at the seminary; it involves cost and commitment. All of us understand the cost of matriculation. Even an all-wise and beneficent Seminary President does not provide ointment enough to salve the wound that has been gouged into budgets of time and resources. Cost entails disruption—re-organizing, re-prioritizing, re-valuing as we follow a certain calling. "The kingdom of heaven has been forcing its way forward" (11:12).

As well, despite the uncertainty surrounding our certain calling, there is commitment, at least minimally the commitment to follow a particular course of study. This commitment involves the self-discipline to study, the purposiveness to do one's best, the perseverance to read that class assignment two or three times or as often as it takes to understand the material. Yet not everyone who merely raises a hand and cries, "Teacher, Teacher, Teach me! Teach me!" shall enter the gradebook with a mark of 85 or better. Herein lies that frustrating and paradoxical sense of calling to the office of the ministry of the Gospel—it involves intellect and passion, cognitive reflection and existential trust. It is a lifelong commitment of faith seeking understanding. It is coming again and again to the table which Wisdom has set for us.

However, with cost and commitment comes this warning. We are not to misunderstand cost and commitment to mean fanaticism. George Santayana once said, "To be a fanatic is to redouble your efforts when you've forgotten your aim." Now, I'm not particularly concerned that any of you will become fanatical about your academic efforts. But I am very concerned—but rest assured not fanatical—how we as Christians engage in types of fanatical superficiality rather than the commitment and cost of discipleship. Bumper stickers serve as good examples. "Honk if you love Jesus" is not commitment, but a fanatical superficiality which, if everyone acted upon, would contribute to higher noise levels and greater danger on our streets and highways. Fanatical superficiality is like whistling in the dark—it is no commitment but a ruse, a preoccupation, a procrastinating action in which we hope that

if we ignore whatever it is long enough it will go away. If it doesn't, we'll just whistle louder and louder and louder. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord! Lord!' shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (7:21). We need constantly to analyze and reflect upon our ministry to understand whether it is truly in service to the gospel or superficial tasks to which we fanatically adhere in order to avoid the cost and commitment to which the gospel calls us.

Jesus in Matthew's gospel is ever so clear, insistent, and persistent in expressing that matriculation into discipleship with him involves cost and commitment, which means breaking with a former way and style of life. The way of life which Jesus inaugurates is a life together with others lived out in the midst of the presence of God. The life of a disciple is a disarming one. Disarmed by the presence of a crucified and living Christ, the disciple follows this Christ who extends, sometimes painfully stretches, this often reluctant disciple far beyond the limits of her or his own longing. Discipleship is not antisocial or asocial. This kind of ministry of reconciliation is indeed very costly in a culture where the thinking, active, modern, energetic achiever finds individualism, privatism, narcissistic me-generation-ism so important, and measures status in terms of designer jeans, jogging shoes, the appropriately current cut of the hemline, the amount of one's salary, one's bank account, one's stock portfolio, and driving the appropriate color BMW for one's personality type.

The person who is a disciple of Jesus in the world is the one who does not expect his or her commitment to be grounded in the self, but looks to the one who promises to be present and with us in all our commitments—no matter how costly. The one conscious of Christian discipleship is the one conscious of dependence upon God. If one views this dependence and its times of helplessness, powerlessness, and weakness as a disgrace, then one can only understand discipleship as a forced confession of submission and impotence. But if one understands the weakness and dependence of discipleship as that grace which makes one worth loving, then discipleship is an openness to God which looks forward to renewal from the constant presence of Jesus. It is an openness which is always surprised at the power present whenever two or three are gathered, or the least is loved. Discipleship in Christ removes the

stress, the despondency, the failure and shame, the effort to prove that we can and must do it alone. We don't have to save the world; God has already done that through Christ. Disciples are the ones who have been called out of their self-centered, proud, rugged individualistic, macho or macha shelters and now have the courage to see the poverty, paucity, and peril of this self-constituted fortress built upon insecure sand (Matthew 7:24-27).

The disciple sees that there is no enemy from which to hide, only the other, those whom God, with all creation, through Christ, has reconciled to God and whom God expects us to call friend. If we insist on clinging tightly to our own weaknesses, faults, shortcomings, and pasts, to all the events, facts, and situations which comprise our history, we are only hiding behind a hedge through which everyone else can see. The cost of discipleship means giving up a false security, no longer looking for arguments which will protect us if we get pushed into a corner, no longer setting our hope on a couple of lighter moments which our life might still offer—the end of the semester, graduation, ordination, new calls, pay raises, a sabbatical or retirement. The commitment of discipleship means to stop expecting from God that same small-mindedness which we discover in ourselves. Matthew's and Paul's emphasis on discipleship is a direct rebuttal and contradiction to the watered-down, diluted version of Christianity which lackadaisically sighs how once in a while humans make a mistake with the result that now and then God has to forgive us. Jesus' call is far more radical. Only a God totally and fully dedicated to love and forgiveness in the very depth and to the very death of its being could deal with humans so totally and pettily wrapped up with themselves. Knowledge about and commitment to this God liberates us to be followers—not wimps, nor legalists, nor fanatics. Disciples remember the risk and the promise of the gospel, they make room for God to be the God of all, they witness to how all life is graced.

When Jesus says follow me, it is primarily a calling to find our own place in this world and to live in that place as a disciple of Jesus. There it is that we not only discover who we are, but we meet people next to us, who with us will cultivate and develop the world God has given to all. "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like

a householder who has abundant resources to meet any need" (Matthew 13:52). Resources grounded in the promise, "I am with you always" (28:20). A promise that already, always, accompanies our calling into discipleship.

Jesus saw a crowd sitting at a place of worship and said to them, "Follow me." And they stood up and...

Amen.

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the opening of the academic year, September 1988, at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.