

June 8, 2008 ~ 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 12: 1-9; Romans 4: 13-25; **Matthew 9: 9-13**, 18-26

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## **ORDINARY SINNERS**

In those first five verses from Matthew, chapter 9 we hear the word sinners three times: "...as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him... 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'... I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Of course we're all sinners. Some of us are just your average sinners – others more the more notorious type. I'm not sure it is up to any of us to determine which is which – who is who. The message of our texts today is that ***sinners*** are called to discipleship. **God calls the most ordinary people to be followers and through following we become a blessing to others.**

Sometimes when we tell our biblical stories we feel compelled to make them fancier, tidier, "nicer" than they are told in the Bible. The Bible tells them in a street-level, warts-and-all kind of way – in the sort of language spoken in the pub or coffee house, on the factory floor or in the field, around the dinner table. The stories in the Bible are usually about pretty ordinary people – woefully ordinary people at times – everyday language for everyday people. The last people on earth you would have imagined were ever going to make it on to the lists of the heroes of the faith. Ordinary sinners just like you and me.

This week many of us finished our study of Philip Yancey's book, *Prayer: Does it make any Difference?* In that final session we looked at how we are called to action through our prayer. As we read texts from Exodus, Judges and Nehemiah we were shown that God accomplishes God's will through some people that are at best unremarkable until God's begins to work through them. In our texts this morning we have other examples:

We don't know a great deal about Matthew, which is probably lucky for Matthew, because even the little we do know is not good. Matthew was a tax collector. Even today the words ring of prejudice in many people's minds. There was a poll of occupations done in the United States recently – people were to rank jobs from most to least honorable. Doctors, scientists, teachers and ministers were at the top – that's a relief! What do you think was considered the most despicable occupation? According to the poll, accountants were at the very bottom of the list – my brother Jerry may want to take issue with that. Certainly I would question that assessment as would most of you. Others at the bottom of the list were bankers, business people, lawyers, journalists and union leaders. It seems that those who work with money didn't rank very. I'm not sure what to make of all that – we need people who do all kinds of work in our world – lawyers and bankers just as much as scientists and clergy.

Anyway – Matthew was a tax collector – a servant of the Roman occupation forces in Judea. It’s not a surprise that tax collectors are consistently portrayed as the lowest of the low in the gospel accounts. Traitors – collaborators in the oppression of their own people – cheats and swindlers of widows and orphans. Matthew was a tax collector. I wonder what an equivalent profession would be today – someone engaged in the systemic taxing of the poor for the benefit of the rich.

Out of all of the possible choices for a disciple, why would Jesus have chosen Matthew? We may wonder but likely shouldn’t expend too much energy trying to puzzle it out since the Bible hardly ever explains the choices God makes, it just reports them. God’s choices are mysterious and unfathomable – and they are usually just as beyond comprehension to those who have been chosen!

And what about Abraham and Sarah from our Genesis reading? Nothing too special about these two: Abraham was fairly successful in his business life – pretty wealthy. But his family life was a bit of a muddle and Sarah was just as messed up. I won’t go into all their family problems here except to provide a couple of edited highlights which will give the picture of what we might call a “dysfunctional” family in today’s vernacular. [I often wonder what a “functional” family looks like.] Apparently Sarah was a fairly striking sort of woman and Abraham kept panicking that someone would do away with him to get their hands on her, so on a couple of occasions he tried to pass her off as his sister, which only made things worse because then every hot-blooded man in the area thought she was fair game. Later in life tension developed between the couple over their inability to have children. At one stage, in desperation for an heir, Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child with the servant girl Hagar. Despite a promise from God for a child by Sarah, Abraham had sex with the servant girl – today we might call it an affair – adultery – a sin. When Hagar got pregnant and had a son, Sarah got jealous – started being mean and abusive until Hagar had had enough and left the house. Let’s just say that Abraham and Sarah’s family saga would make quite a soap opera!

Why on earth would God choose Sarah and Abraham? Not only choose them, but guarantee that they would be a source of blessing for the entire world? Once again, don’t bother wondering. God’s choices are unfathomable – especially to those who have been chosen!

The thing that seems to be a clear pattern is that God doesn’t pick out the especially worthy or the especially pure. God seems to pick out people who are ordinary, often even ordinary to the point of pathetic – people with just as many marital and family problems, personal failings and skeletons in the closet as anybody else. God seems to choose people whose past lives are not all that unsullied and pure – people whose lives up to the point when God’s decides to work through them show little or no potential for future contribution – ordinary sinners, garden-variety people much like us.

Maybe God just likes a challenge. Maybe God uses utterly ordinary people so that when we see the extraordinary things that God is able to do through them, we’ll know it was God and therefore that there’s hope for us too!

Maybe God is saying, "You see Julie Jones there, just an store clerk, marking prices, stocking shelves, serving customers. Just wait to see what I can do with her when I touch her with my love and call her to follow me. Julie Jones and Jesus, now there's a world changing team."

Perhaps God is thinking, "You see Sam Smith over there, just another hard working guy trying to retire, losing touch with his family and with a tenuous grip on sobriety much of the time. Just wait to see what I can do with him when I stand in his path and call him to give up his self-reliance act and abandon himself to the wind of the Spirit."

This God is unstoppable. There is no-one who is so far gone and so messed up that God's love can't reach them and transform them into unbelievably different people. I'm not saying that if you follow Christ's call that all your problems will be over and that life will be sunshine and roses from here on in. I'm sure Matthew had plenty of days when he thought he'd have been better off back in the tax office in front of his computer than traipsing around the countryside with radical teacher who was getting death threats left, right and center.

But what I am saying is that if you will turn from the idolatries of money, image and power, and follow the one who said that all that matters is loving God, yourself and others, then there is no telling how significant a contribution you may find yourself making to the future of this planet and its inhabitants.

If Jesus can take someone like Matthew and turn him into one of the founders of the church, then what can the Lord do with you? All Matthew had to do was stand up, walk out of the office, stumble along after Jesus and see what happened from there.

If God can take a cynical old woman like Sarah and a tired old man like Abraham and make them the source of blessing to all the world, then what can God do with you?  
**Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. This sermon is adapted from a one by Nathan Nettleton, June 1996.