

2nd Sunday after Pentecost A 11 June 2023
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from Almighty God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one, true, eternal God. Amen.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. Let's pray: ...

Today we are blessed Saints, with stories of God's gracious disposition toward us and how the power of his grace changes people.

This change is a process we call "conversion", which simply means "to turn around." God's grace turns us away from our inward-looking, self-interested lives of sin and toward the cross and new life in Christ. Let's now put some flesh on what God's grace is and how grace works in people's lives, with two stories.

The first story is about a young pastor's discovery of the true substance of the gospel – unconditional grace. *

For years, a young pastor had preached the gospel as though it were law. His belief was that to live a God pleasing life, we must live a life of self-denial and obedience to Christ. In effect, he believed that if people earnestly struggled against their sin, then God will accept them. But his "gospel" is no "gospel" because there are conditions attached. It's law. His poor parishioners are either discouraged or self-righteous. That's what the law does to people.

One morning, this young pastor is called to the house of a dying man who's well known for his piety. The pastor sits at the man's bedside and asks him if there's anything he'd like to confess. To the pastor's great dismay, as the poor man's mind wanders in and out of consciousness, he opens with a salvo of past sins. Jealousy, revenge, envy, self-righteous pride – all delivered with vulgarity that would make a battle-hardened soldier blush. The thin veneer of his conscious faith tore open and laid bare the evil that still dwelt within his heart (*The Hammer of God*, pp 195,196).

The young pastor recoils more out of realisation than shock, that he himself is no different. How much of a person's old sinful nature could still reside in them? On what grounds could this man be saved? His faith? Yet, that seemed to fade at the same moment his consciousness clouded; and behind it all lurked the sin, pulsing turbulently to the very end (ibid. p 199). Surely, God's law demands that we get better and better. But what happens when we discover that all our old evil lurks in the depths? If God accepts me because of my sincerity, what do I do when I discover that this sincerity is only a pious, superficial veneer?

The young pastor's questions were answered that same day by the same lips that had shaken the pastor to his core. In the last moments of consciousness, the dying man's daughter asked him, "You are still thinking about Jesus, are you not, Father?" And he replied, "I'm not able to, Daughter. I can't think any longer. But I know Jesus is thinking of me" (ibid. pp 193, 194). That's the gospel in a nutshell, Saints. The man is a Christian who dies in grace, in spite of the sin lurking in his heart! And the young pastor's heart is finally converted to God's unconditional grace – the only gospel.

The second story is about a man named, Matthew.

Matthew bore the dishonourable distinction of being reviled by his people. His boss negotiated contracts for tax collection, but left the despicable work to lambs to the slaughter like Matthew. Matthew worked out of a dump of an office in the commercial district, collecting tolls on the transportation of goods and other taxes to pass on to the Roman occupiers.

Matthew was seen as a collaborator, a flunky for the Roman Empire that dominated the Holy Land. He was a living reminder to his neighbours of their heavy tax burden: Jews were forced to pay both civil and religious taxes. Worst of all, it was common knowledge that many in Matthew's position were scoundrels and cheats. In both the minds of the people and in religious writings, tax collectors were lumped together with thieves, murderers, and other wholesale sinners. Tax collection was on the list of despised occupations that no practicing Jew should follow. People like Matthew were considered to be lost souls.

Then one day, as Matthew was plying his grimy trade, grace entered his life like a breath of fresh air. Jesus turned up to challenge Matthew's miserable existence. But there was something different about Jesus. He didn't treat Matthew as the locals did. Jesus didn't despise or condemn him. To the contrary, Jesus offered Matthew a compelling deal.

"Follow me," said Jesus. I'm sure Matthew was caught completely by surprise; yet, he recognised a good deal when he heard one. So, he immediately left the tax office to follow Jesus, I reckon, barely stopping to lock the door behind him.

Matthew was completely unaware of what he was getting himself into, but he followed Jesus anyway. His conversion began as he turned his back on sordid rip-offs and followed someone who gave him everything he needed for free. Matthew experienced 'grace upon grace' (John 1:16) as he followed and learnt the ways of his true Master.

Matthew followed and followed and continued to follow Jesus. He walked with him along dusty roads, and, however unfaithfully, through the events of Holy Week. Still, Jesus continued to call, and Matthew continued to follow.

Matthew's understanding of grace grew stronger day-by-day as he continued to follow Jesus and became a witness to the resurrection. Grace remained potent, and grew ever stronger in Matthew's life as the enormity of Jesus' sacrifice dawned on him. Grace empowered him to record his witness in the book that bears his name, the Gospel according to Matthew – the wonderful gospel that bridges the span between the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus still calls, and Matthew continues to follow. If you look at the church calendar, you'll see that the Feast of St Matthew is remembered on the 21st of September. The liturgical colour for that day is red, the colour of blood, indicating that Matthew was a martyr, someone led by grace to offer his life in the service of Christ's gospel.

Swindler. Collaborator. Greedy. Shameful. That's how people regarded Matthew as he hid away in his little den, taking in money dishonestly and unjustly. But there's no place so obscure that Jesus can't find someone, and one day, grace knocked on Matthew's door, and his life was completely turned around.

Matthew's transformation had many faces. Converted to God, the Lord of mercy. Converted to Jesus, who loves the unworthy. Converted to the church, those early Christians. Even converted to the world. Matthew, the once despised cheat, whose heart had been as hard as the silver coins he collected, is the one who records that little gem where Jesus proclaims, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:31-46 [40]).

Grace can turn up in the most unlikely places, at the most unlikely times, in the most unlikely ways, blown on the wind of God's ever-seeking Spirit. The young pastor's heart was converted to the truth of the gospel as he learnt of unconditional grace and love from the lips of a dying man, and grace swept through Matthew as his life was completely turned around as he answered the call and followed the Lord of grace. If grace transforms characters like these two, can the rest of us be immune to Jesus' advances?

What does grace look like in your life? Consider your conversion to God; to Christ; to the church, and this community, at the same time sinful yet redeemed; and to the world, the world for which Christ died. How is grace stirring your heart as Jesus continues to beckon and call you more deeply into his transformative love? How might you present God's grace to a world that doesn't know where or how to turn?

Saints, welcome grace when he comes again today in, with, and under the bread and wine. Expect grace to appear to you over and over again in strange and mysterious ways. And give thanks whenever grace breaks into your life.

May grace embrace you as it did the young pastor and Matthew and your lives be renewed and invigorated for God's work wherever he may lead you. And remember, don't be afraid because grace holds you in the palm of Almighty God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, the unconditional grace of God. Amen.

* Acknowledgement is given to Bishop Bo Giertz, the author of *The Hammer of God*, pp 182-227, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1973 edition.
