

A Proper 5, 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev. David Rider
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Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Happy Ordinary Time!

With the spiritual drama of Easter and Pentecost behind us, our colors turn green and we embrace what the Church has come to know as ordinary time, a pious way of saying the lazier days of summer

As we settle into a summer rhythm of Scripture readings, we now focus on details of Jesus' earthly ministry—his teaching, healing, and proclaiming of God's Kingdom

We also hear about Jesus' calling forth of his disciples, a motley, ragtag group with thin credentials who exude human vulnerability and, yet, ultimately become the Dream Team of human history

Like you and me today, each of Jesus' disciples has his or own human story—and they're not always pretty—but Jesus calls them forth, confronts their weaknesses, celebrates their strengths and equips them to do God's will, on earth as it is in heaven

Jesus calls them not because of any inherent virtue, but because God—in God's freedom—chooses whom God chooses

With today's call story, we witness the epitome of this transformation, a redemption template as applicable today as it was during that first party with the hoards of tax collectors and sinners

Our story is found amid the fast-paced chapters 8-9 in MT's Gospel, along with healing a leper, a centurion's servant, calming storms, exorcizing demons and healing a paralytic, two blind men and a mute

Jesus speaks, and his words have great power and authority over forces of nature, over demonic powers, over sin and disease, and now, over a tax collector

Jesus speaks and it happens -- perhaps more easily with the day's social riff raff than with the righteous

It's pretty heady stuff as it becomes the big-picture theme of this summer's scripture readings

So what did Jesus see in this gruff, hated, probably corrupt man named Matthew?

At this point, our text frustrates—yet beckons—the modern reader

Remember that these calls are not always a done deal. In another story, for example, Jesus confronts the rich man and tells him to sell his possessions as a precondition to discipleship. The man considers the challenge, says “no thanks” and walks away

Today, we are denied any psychological build-up to understand why Jesus chose Matthew or why the tax collector responded

The text simply says, Jesus saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And the man got up and followed him.

The next exchange, however, gives us a feel for what might be taking place, serving as proxy for how you and I bring our humanity before God

In a world with very clear social and dietary norms, Jesus raises the Pharisees' ire by eating with these outcasts—the tax collectors and sinners (probably a euphemism for prostitutes)

Jesus issues a clarion call: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Certainly, we can understand how Matthew's Jewish peers distrusted him as tax collector

We don't know, however, if the early Matthew was a wontedly corrupt man who fleeced his fellow Jews or whether he was an honorable man in a controversial profession

Also, the text does not tell us whether Matthew had a deep conversion experience or whether he simply complied with the charismatic power of Jesus' authority

Was Matthew deeply troubled in his soul, was he guilty of practicing corruption and demanding the last shekel from a starving widow?

Was he leading a chaotic life in need of redemption or simply getting through the day when he encounters Jesus?

The story frustrates—yet beckons—us with its non-answer to the question

We do know, however, that Matthew's life was changed decisively by his conscious decision to stand up and follow Jesus

Unlike the rich man who walked away, Matthew said Yes to Jesus, and Matthew became a leader in the emerging apostolic community

Jesus no doubt confronted Matthew by his paraphrasing of Hosea, who reminds us that God demands mercy (not the first word associated with a tax collector), not sacrifice

This mercy—or *hesed*—implies an open, responsive heart to God's commands rather than an outward conformity that is devoid of inner spirit

Jesus corroborates Hosea's earlier condemnation of ritualistic purity that has lost this *hesed*—or covenant love—which God gives to us and demands us to pass on to others

Jesus denounces the Pharisees for their failure to apply mercy and forgiveness that would welcome outcasts into the community of grace

In contrast, Jesus intentionally sits with sinners and invites them into the kingdom, thereby reconciling—making righteous—those who have been lost to God and separated from the community

The consequence of Jesus' outreach to Matthew becomes very powerful both to Matthew as an individual and as a member of the faith community

In fact, as a response to Jesus' call, this Matthew—like his contemporary, Paul—moves from being a rather dubious character to one who is filled with the Spirit and takes on active, servant leadership for the sake of the Gospel

As one who is healed by Jesus the physician, Matthew moves beyond his self-serving corruption to become a pivotal witness for the nescient Church

This *hesed*—this mercy that fills Matthew’s heart and spreads contagiously to others—overcomes any hair-splitting, ritual purity that the Pharisees would serve up

This heart-felt mercy, this palpable love of God and concern for neighbor, became the hallmark of Christian identity, and remain so for you and me today

In our story, Jesus invokes the physician’s metaphor, so let’s take it one step further in its application for our common life today

After Matthew’s call by Jesus and in his remaining days as an apostle, we never hear any residual concern about Matthew’s being a corrupt, exploitative tax collector who lords it over less powerful members of the community

In his call to follow the master, Jesus the physician demands that Matthew change his interaction with the world and—to use poetic language—grow into the full stature of Christ

The physician demands transformation and new life, not chronic spiritual disease that must be managed and endured

As followers of Christ, we do grow into this full stature and—as St. Paul said—we give up our childish ways to become mature men and women in faith

As Christians, we do not navigate the world as victims, curmudgeons, or spiritual masochists, nor are we stuck in our old blaming ways

Hesed—loving mercy—becomes our hallmark, not self-serving manipulations or victim-like excuses for why the world has let us down

As I said at the outset, the first disciples were truly a ragtag group of misfits who in no way deserved to be Jesus' inner circle

The master calls them in spite of themselves, heals their infirmities, and transforms them into a proactive, other-centered, elite—not elitist, but elite—missionary force that proclaimed God's Kingdom

After encountering Jesus, Matthew could never go back to life as usual at the toll both, with its petty corruption and manipulation of his neighbors

As the body of Christ, as people who have been called and made whole by Jesus the physician, neither should you and I today

When Jesus calls us into discipleship, he calls us to live into the merciful, sacrificial love of God, he heals our infirmities and calls us to lead from grateful, abundant strength, not angry, resentful victimization

As you live into the summer, how are you living your personal life according to this Good News?

What is your dream for how our parish can live this Good News in the season ahead?

Individually and collectively, how do we celebrate transformation in our daily life and work?