

If you're a Christian, then you are a called person. This is to say, this whole thing did not begin with you. Nor is it about you. It began with the Lord who called you to himself. You wouldn't belong to him unless he called you. And what's more, you are here today – in this worship service – not because it seemed like a good idea to you (or to your spouse, or to your parent, or whoever got you here), but because you were called.

From time to time people come in to my office to talk about their “calling” – by which they mean their job, their occupation. But in the New Testament calling has more to do with what God is doing in and through your life. It's not about your job so much as it's about your character – your identity – your purpose and how to find it.

First and foremost, you're called to Jesus Christ, to get changed in him (change you really can believe in). That's where we begin this morning, with the call of an unlikely disciple named Levi.

Luke 5:27-32

27 After this, [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

The Calling of Saint Matthew is a masterpiece by Caravaggio completed during the Baroque period in 1599-1600 for the Contarelli Chapel in the San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome.

Caravaggio represents the event as a nearly silent, dramatic narrative. Yet we can easily imagine the sequence of events both before and after this moment.

The tax-gatherer Levi is seated at a table with his four assistants, counting the day's proceeds. Christ, his eyes hidden in shadow – his halo the only hint of divinity, enters with Peter. Peter is older, rougher, thicker. Jesus is younger, thinner and intense in his gaze.

Christ gestures with his right hand, all the more powerful and compelling because of its languor and summons Levi.

Surprised, Levi draws back in disbelief and gestures toward himself with his left hand as if to say, "Who, me? A tax collector?"

The two figures on the left don't even notice Christ's arrival; too greedy to stop their counting. Symbolically, their inattention to Christ deprives them of the opportunity he offers for eternal life, so they are condemned to death.

The two boys in the center do respond, the younger one drawing back against Levi as if seeking his protection, the swaggering older one, who is armed with a sword, leaning forward a little menacingly, immediately ready for a brawl. Peter gestures with his hand to calm his potential resistance.

The dramatic point of the picture is that for this moment, no one does anything. Christ's miraculous appearance is so unexpected and his gesture so commanding as to suspend action for

a shocked instant, before reaction can take place. This is the moment of conversion – the moment of spiritual awakening.

In another second, Levi will rise up and follow Christ – in fact, Christ's bare feet (a symbol of his holiness) are already turned as if to leave the room. The particular power of the picture is in the stillness captured in all the movement between gesture and eye and hand and face. It conveys the characteristic human indecision after a challenge or command and before reaction.

The clothing reinforces the contrast. Levi and his helpers, who are involved in affairs of this world, are dressed in the contemporary style, while the barefoot Christ and Peter, who summon Levi to another life and world, appear in timeless cloaks. The two groups are also separated by a void, bridged literally and symbolically by Christ's hand – under the cross of the upper window.

This hand, like Adam's in Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, unifies the two parts formally and psychologically.

In this grimy, dirty, dimly lit room – it's the upper light that comes in with Christ that illuminates Matthew's face and the seated group. This Divine light has entered everyday life – Christ brings with him true light into the dark space. We don't see Jesus on a throne floating in the brilliant blue sky surrounded by clouds and singing angels.

This is a Jesus that has come to find us at our own greedy moment – that moment when we are stealing, sneaking and using others for our own gain.

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It's hard to imagine a more thoroughly despised character in first century Israel than a guy like Levi. The Roman occupiers hired greedy, unscrupulous types like him to collect taxes from their own countrymen – which essentially made them traitors. What's more, they were allowed to keep whatever extra they got from overcharging people – which made them rich. No great surprise then that tax collectors like Levi were avoided by pretty much everybody. The synagogues kicked them out and good Jews were forbidden to do business with them or hang out with them socially. They viewed tax collectors the way we might view a drug lord or a child pornographer: the kind of guy you love to hate.

So the first big surprise is that Jesus would call a man no one else wanted and invite him to be his disciple. But then, Jesus specialized in rejects, didn't he? Whether it's a greedy tax collector like Levi or a loud-mouthed fisherman like Peter or a woman with a history of mental instability like Mary Magdalene – Jesus sees something glorious, something God-made in each of them, and by calling them he brings it out.

And that's what happens here. Look at verse 27. It says Jesus went out and saw Levi – and in Greek the word suggests that Jesus saw into him, saw him as he really was. Jesus sees something in this rejected man, something no one else could see, something waiting to be released. And that release began when Jesus called him. It is this powerful call of Jesus Christ

that liberates Levi from the past, which tears him away from what has been destroying him, debasing him. Jesus sees what's inside, and releases it as he calls him: "Follow me."

And Luke tells us, Levi "got up, left everything and followed him." That's the second big surprise – that Levi would respond to this call and leave his old life. We've already seen that Levi wasn't popular, but he was rich, and it wasn't easy to leave behind a top-paying job and follow an itinerant rabbi like Jesus who probably wasn't offering much by way of salary and benefits. And bear in mind that if following Jesus didn't work out, those fishermen like Peter, James, and John could always go back to their old trade. But Levi wouldn't have that option. The Romans wouldn't be inclined to rehire someone who'd walked away from the system. Like the Mafia – you either in for life or your out for good. So for Levi, following Jesus means burning his bridges, making a decisive break from his old life.

But Levi shows no signs of regret. Just the opposite.

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

So! Levi throws a dinner party and invites his former business associates (the closest thing to friends he's got) to celebrate his career change. And the guest of honor is none other than Jesus himself. Levi is having the time of his life – schmoozing and shaking hands, introducing Jesus to all his friends. Now that's an amazing transformation: he's gone from being an extortionist to an evangelist. And Jesus seems to be enjoying it, too.

There are a lot of things I admire about Jesus – his courage, his brilliance, his integrity, his compassion – but the thing that impresses me here is his winsomeness, his ability to be comfortable with all kinds of people and to make them feel comfortable. Yes, he could be tough and confronting when he had to be. He could face down a lynch mob. He could single-handedly throw the money changers out of the temple. But by all accounts, he was good at conversation and he knew how to have fun at a party. In fact, his enemies accused him of having too much fun – called him a glutton and a drunkard.

Jesus was different. He was engaging. Look in the Gospels and you see over and over again how all kinds of people invited Jesus into their homes – they wanted to be with him, and they enjoyed talking with him.

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But not everyone in this story is having a good time. The Pharisees are stunned. The word "Pharisee" means "separated one." And that's how they saw themselves: a spiritually elite God squad set apart to keep the Jewish religion pure and untainted. They must have been waiting

outside the house, because they wouldn't be caught dead in the same room with Levi and his low life friends.

Remember, at this time eating and drinking together is a big deal. In first century Palestine having a meal with someone is a sign of friendship, acceptance, even intimacy. For the Pharisees, coming into close contact with Levi and company means defilement, moral contamination, becoming unclean. You can't hang around people like that and not pick up the contagion – or at least that's how they see it. So they pounce on Jesus' disciples as they're leaving Levi's house: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answers them by saying, "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I haven't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

And here's the big difference between Jesus and the Pharisees – in fact, the big difference between Jesus and all religious systems. The Pharisees, like all religious systems, want to have clear bright lines that separate good people from bad people, and then have nothing to do with the bad people.

Then Jesus comes along and says, "There really are no good and bad people. There are only those who know they're bad, know they're sick; know they're in need – and those who don't. The sickness of sin infects all humanity – everyone. The only difference is that some know they're sick and need help, while others refuse to admit it. I've come for those who know they've got a problem, those who know they're sinners, and those who know they need a doctor like me."

In other words, the Pharisees are just as defiled, just as sick as the tax collectors. The only difference is they don't recognize it. They can't admit their condition. And that's a dangerous place to be for anyone. Because not even Jesus can help you if you stubbornly insist you're OK, you don't need his help, as far as you're concerned the real problem is those guys over there, on the other side of that moral line (and you know who they are for you), those guys who are the sinners, who are the sick one – not you.

The way Jesus sees it there are two kinds of people. Not good guys and bad guys. But those who know they're poor and needy, and those who don't. These two types of people are found in the pages of scripture, and they're here in this room this very morning. Some see themselves as just fine the way they are, and they resent any suggestion to the contrary.

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Scripture is resoundingly clear that our faith, our discipleship, is not about us. It is about God. We are not worthy of being worshipped. The things we elevate and pursue when we worship ourselves; wealth, power, privilege, and pleasure are not worthy of our praise. God alone is worthy of our praise.

Jesus can do little for people who think they're fine the way they are. But Jesus can do everything for the person who is a sinner and knows it and longs for change. He was and still is

the friend of sinners. He comes not for the healthy and righteous. He calls out to the sin-sick souls who know they need him.

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Which group are you in? Don't worry about anyone else. Don't wonder whether so-and-so is listening. What about you? Do you long for healing and change in your own heart, in your own relationships, in your own life? If so, Jesus says, "I've come for you. No matter how defiled you feel yourself to be, no matter what your record, no matter what you've done, no matter how ashamed you are of yourself, no matter what's been done to you, no matter how stained you are, no matter how low you feel, no matter how guilty," Jesus says, "you're my type. I've come for you."

Jesus is speaking not only to us as individuals but also to us as a church. "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Somehow we've got to get it straight that the Church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for recovering sinners. The Church of Jesus Christ is not a club we belong to because we've met the fitness requirements. We are a community of needy persons who have been called by Jesus Christ, and who bind ourselves together in him, and who want to share with others the grace and the hope we've found.

Gordon MacDonald, one of my favorite writers, says this:

*The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.*¹

And that's what we're called to be about, you and I. To receive the grace Jesus offers, and then to creatively offer that same grace to others, wherever they are. To quit drawing bright lines separating the good from the bad, and to be a community of Jesus, a congregation of grace in this world of ungrace.

You never know what will happen if you answer Jesus' call. Levi follows Jesus and he gets a new name. After this story he's never again called Levi. From now on he's known as Matthew (the one who will eventually put together the first Gospel), and Matthew means "gift of God." Not bad. From an unwanted reject to a gift of God.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ invites us to follow him. We come not because we are righteous and deserving, but because, like Levi, Jesus has called us to himself. Jesus sees something in you and he wants to bring it out, wants to release it. He is here to give you a new start. The only requirement is that you admit your need for what only Jesus can bring. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor," he says, "but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus is calling your name. Won't you come?

¹ Quoted by Philip Yancey in *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan, 1997), p.15.