
LEAVE. LEARN. LIVE AGAIN.

MATTHEW 9:9-13, 18-26

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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It's growing season. No, this isn't simply a horticultural or agricultural statement. I'm talking about the time in the church year where everything turns green. We are in common time. The frontal and our stoles are no longer the purple of Advent or Lent, nor are they the white of Christmas or Easter or other holy days. They are green because it's growing time. During this season that stretches from the Sunday after Pentecost through the end of November and Christ the King Sunday, the church turns its focus to the long and sometimes slow process of growth in our life with Jesus. There are Christian holidays that punctuate the calendar along the way, offering bursts of white during this time, and yet the consistent theme of the season is the steady growth represented by the green.

During this time, the scripture passages from the Gospels that guide our weekly worship tell the stories of faith lived in daily life and practice. They tell the stories of Jesus's life and ministry beyond the drama of his birth, death, and resurrection. They tell the stories that are left out of the Apostles' Creed that in just a few words jumps from Jesus's birth to his resurrection to the end of time. The stories of Jesus's ministry that we read and study and learn from during this season help fill out the reality of daily life for those who follow Jesus. They provide the fertilizer for the long season of growing.

This morning I want us to listen to the stories of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew in the context of this growing time. But let me offer one reminder here that anyone who has grown recently or who can remember the days when your body was growing will likely know: growing can come with a certain level of discomfort from time to time. This is okay. The discomfort we feel in our journey with Jesus that stretches us to become more like the one we follow is a holy discomfort that is for our good. So, we receive the words from scripture, these stories of Jesus, as those ready to grow regardless of the challenge or discomfort that may come with it.

This morning I want to invite you to listen for three invitations as part of this growing time. Regardless of where you are in your life with God, each of them may speak to an opportunity for growth in this season. You may find that each of these invitations connects with your life with Jesus in the present, calling you into a new way of being or doing. Or perhaps you will find that just one invitation in particular really captures Jesus's calling for you right now. No matter which it is, there is an invitation for growth for you.

At this point in Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus has come down from the mountain where he had been teaching about great moral and spiritual issues, covering everything from faithfulness with money to faithfulness in marriage and much more. Since coming down from the mountain, the Gospel storyteller shares that Jesus had been at work healing folks as people followed him wherever he went. Prior to our lesson in Matthew chapter 9, Jesus has performed healing miracles on five occasions, demonstrating that his work was for the healing and restoration

of many. These miracles were met with awe and wonder from some, worship of God from others, and even with requests to move on to another place.

With these healings fresh in the memories of those journeying with him, Jesus walked up to a man sitting at his job, engaged in the realities of his everyday life. The man was a tax collector. Let's just say, this isn't the line of work you should go into if you are a people pleaser. Tax collectors worked for the Roman occupiers, and they were despised. They were known for betraying their own people for their individual material gain. One commentator calls tax collectors the "moral untouchable[s]."¹ Tax collectors would over charge those from whom they collected. Theirs was not only a dishonest accumulation of wealth, their work was a form exploitation of the poor and powerless in a larger system of oppression. The tax collectors were like white collar criminals in a system built to allow them to get away with their wrongdoing. So in the community's perception, they were lumped together with thieves, extortioners, and other corrupt people.

There the tax collector sat perhaps ready to take his cut from from the miracle working man, and Jesus walked up to him and said "follow me." The scriptures tell us that the man, Matthew was his name, got up and followed Jesus. A call and a response. Jesus's invitation to follow was met with a getting up and leaving behind. Following Jesus often involves getting up and leaving behind. There is an obvious invitation or calling from Jesus here to "follow me." Yet this morning, I want us to consider as the first invitation in this growing time the invitation to get up and leave behind. Sometimes the life of faith involves getting up and leaving some things behind. I wonder, from what do you need to get up and what needs left behind as you follow Jesus?

Perhaps you find yourself in a situation like the tax collector's, and you recognize deep down that you're involved in perpetuating systems of economic disadvantage for the poor and oppressed of our world. And while many of our economic systems are created in a way that makes it so we don't have to see the people we harm, perhaps you know that your daily practices are hurting the most vulnerable in your community. Maybe it's time as an act of following Jesus for you to get up and leave some things behind—things like your habits of consumption or accumulation or maybe even your job. Or perhaps the invitation to get up and leave behind is about walking away from destructive habits, binding prejudices, debilitating attitudes, or patterns of engaging your daily life that prevent or hamper relationships of love and trust. Perhaps like the tax collector, the place you've been sitting perpetuates your own disconnection from community, leaving you on the outside of the deep and true community you desire. Maybe it's time to get up and leave behind some ways of living that keep you perpetually estranged. Can you hear Jesus saying to you, "Get up. Leave behind. Follow me."

The story continues with Jesus and his disciples at a meal with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus and those who are following him regularly hang out with the outcasts and reprobates, and this is no exception. Apparently, Jesus forgot the warnings that all parents give their children about being careful of the company they keep. Nevertheless, Jesus was eating with evildoers, tabling with transgressors, dining with the despised. And like any folks serious about moral formation or about living an upright and righteous life, the Pharisees were upset about what Jesus and his followers

¹F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1, Updated Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), 418.

were doing. Though the Pharisees often get a bad rep, the truth is these were people who Jesus engaged quite intently. One commentator simply calls Pharisees “the Serious” because they were people who were morally and religiously serious. They deeply considered the commands of their faith and their understanding of what was holy and righteous, and seemingly as a result, Jesus kept having meaningful conversation with them about matters of life with God.

When Jesus heard the Pharisees concern about his dinner companions, he responded with a proverb-like saying and a command connected to scripture. “It’s not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this scripture from Hosea means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Jesus tells these folks who are serious about living upright lives that the shape of the moral life is the shape of mercy extended to wrongdoers of all kinds. Mercy connects Jesus’s followers *with* people instead of separating them *from* people. Jesus tells those who are serious about their religious life to trade the separation of sacrifice for the connection of mercy. Following Jesus means connecting with those who are most evidently in need of mercy, even as we recognize God’s mercy that has come to us. Jesus tells the Pharisees to go and learn what this means.

Here we have the second invitation: go and learn. Perhaps you consider yourself to be serious about your life with God. (Your presence on a summer Sunday indicates that.) If so, good for you! I hope we’ll all take our faith life seriously. Yet maybe you’ve let your pursuit of godliness or your desire for holiness or your want of being seen with the well-healed crowd keep you from the deep connections with those to whom God shows mercy. Sometimes the life of faith involves recognizing your own need to go and learn, and then doing it. What if going and learning meant dining on the side of the road with the panhandler who asks you for any spare change that will help? What if going and learning meant making relationships with currently or formerly incarcerated individuals? What if going and learning meant building a relationship with someone who is part of one of Durham’s underground economies? What if going and learning meant pursuing restoration and reconciliation with someone who has taken money or something more valuable from you? Jesus’s invitation to those of us who are serious about our life with God is to go and learn. Jesus’s disciples followed him to the table of outcasts and wrongdoers. I wonder, where do you need to go and what do you need to learn?

Matthew tells us that as Jesus was teaching, a leader came up to him saying his daughter had died. The leader asked Jesus to come and touch his daughter, so she might live again. This time, Jesus was the one who got up and followed. Just as Matthew got up and followed Jesus, Jesus and his disciples with him got up and followed this leader to the place of death. Jesus showed his disciples that his healing mercy gets up and goes to the place of despair and hopelessness—to the place of death. While they were walking to the leader’s home, a woman with a bleeding condition approached Jesus and touched the fringe of his cloak. And though she had suffered for 12 years, Jesus said this act of faith had made her well. With no additional fanfare, Jesus continued to the leader’s home, where the mourners doubted that Jesus’s presence would matter. Yet when Jesus touched the girl, she was lived again. The leader sought healing for his daughter and the woman sought healing for herself. Both approached Jesus trusting his power to heal. Both boldly asked Jesus, one in word and one in deed, for the healing they needed. And Jesus provided.

The third invitation this morning is the invitation to approach Jesus for the healing you need to live again. Sometimes the life of faith recognizes that you simply need Jesus to follow you to where you need healing. This healing can be spiritual, or emotional, or physical, or a combination of all of them. We see from the leader with the dead daughter and the woman with the blood issue that it takes courage, humility, faith and desire to be made well by the touch of Jesus. Sometimes it takes asking Jesus to follow you to the place of need, and sometimes it takes bringing the place of need to Jesus in an act of unhindered faith. Perhaps today you find yourself asking Jesus to follow you to the place where your heart breaks in despair, where your life is unraveling because of loss, where the pain of sickness and death has disrupted everything you hold dear. Can you hear your heart saying, “Follow me, Jesus, and give life again”? Maybe you find yourself coming to church or showing up wherever you think Jesus might be, actively stretching out your hand in yet one more attempt to find the healing and freedom you long for. Perhaps you’ve tried everything you can imagine to experience healing—you’ve even tried coming to Jesus before—and yet you’re finally in a place where no social customs and no prior barriers will prevent you from touching Jesus and having him declare that you are well. Perhaps you’re finally reaching for the hem of the healer, and this growing season will be the one in which you are healed. I wonder, what healing do you really need today?

Leave. Learn. Live again. Whether you receive God’s grace by Jesus coming to you or you going to Jesus, these three invitations, these three callings, these three opportunities for growth in faith and life with Jesus are offered to you in this growing season. I pray that the green you see in this place, and the green you see all around, will remind you of Jesus’s invitation for your growth in him and in his grace that enables it all. Amen.