“Following the Master”
The Feast of St. Matthew, Apostle & Evangelist
Sept. 21, AD 2025
(The Fourteenth Sunday After TRINITY)
Matthew ix. 9-13

In today’s Collect for St. Matthew, we pray for the grace to **“forsake all covetous desires, and inordinate love of riches,”** and like St. Matthew willingly did, follow Jesus Christ. The pursuit of riches might well have been Matthew’s motivation for his chosen line of work—a publican or tax collector. In collecting taxes for the hated Roman rulers of Judea, publicans were considered traitors, and were known to extract extortionate fees to pad their own pockets. Breaking the commandments against stealing and coveting was something many publicans could be found guilty of. Given their questionable character and unpopular work, publicans were widely despised as notorious sinners by both Jew and Gentile alike. Jews even prohibited marrying into a publican’s family, and basically shunned them from all religious and social life. So how is it that Jesus drew Matthew into the fold as one of His disciples? Divine grace is a wonderful mystery, isn’t it?

In all likelihood, Matthew was a witness to Jesus’ teaching and miracles prior to his call to discipleship. His tax booth could well have been set up by the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum, since fishermen were included in the taxing by Herod Antipas, and Capernaum was a

Roman garrison town. The Gospels of Mark and Luke also include an account of Matthew's call. There he is called "Levi" not "Matthew." Both names could have been his at birth, or he could have assumed the name Matthew after his conversion. Matthew means "gift of Yahweh." Matthew's gift of new life from God through His Son Jesus Christ is the same gift we are given, if we too answer the call to follow Jesus in the power of the Holy Ghost. But that new life is not without its controversies and difficulties, as we learn immediately from our Gospel lesson.

In Luke's account, it is Levi himself who throws a *"great feast"* at his house with Jesus being the celebrated guest. The guest list also includes many publicans and sinners who came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. The big crowd doesn't escape the notice of the Pharisees, who accuse Jesus of eating with *"publicans and sinners."* The Pharisees would consider "sinners" to be anyone who didn't keep the Law as they interpreted it, which would include publicly known offenders like prostitutes, and other unclean persons who failed to keep the strict purity requirements of the religious establishment. Why would any so-called "Master" of religion cause scandal by fraternizing with such people?

"But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. [13] But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." [9:12-13]

In brief, these words encapsulate Jesus Christ's mission to reconcile those who are sick with sin to the holiness of God for their soul's healing and salvation. Our Lord quotes the prophet Hosea by saying *"I will have mercy, and not sacrifice."* Hosea was lamenting the breaking of God's covenant, especially by the northern kingdom of Israel, through the pagan cultic practices of Baal worship, which included ritual prostitution. The Hebrew word ***"hesed"*** in Hosea is here translated as "mercy," but also signifies steadfast love and covenantal faithfulness. No doubt there was irony in Jesus' tone in His remark that He has *"not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* The implication is that the though the Pharisees are ritually observant, their lack of charity indicates they need a physician even more than the publicans.

The message Jesus gives the Pharisees is one we need to remind ourselves of time and time again. Our ritualistic observance of the Eucharist will be to our condemnation unless we exhibit steadfast love and covenant faithfulness in our daily lives. We also need to hear the message Jesus gives Matthew and the other less than virtuous people assembled at the feast. We are called to repentance, to renounce our wayward ways, and follow the Master into a spiritual kingdom where we are both forgiven and forgiving, and purified of sin.

We know St. Matthew heard that message. Like the other faithful disciples, he *"left everything"* – not just his unsavory work, but his old acquaintances and his habitual sins. He left behind the idols of money and riches to gain treasure in heaven. In doing so, St. Matthew contrasts favorably with the young man who comes to Jesus saying *"Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"* The young man claims to have kept all the commandments faithfully, which would include the most important one: **"I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have none other gods but me."** But Jesus seeing into his idolatrous heart, and says:

"If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. [22] But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." [19:21-22]

St. Matthew was with the other disciples named in Acts 1:13, as they *"all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication."* Consequently, he must've been there when the disciples voted to have Matthias take the place of Judas Iscariot. Little else is known for certain about St. Matthew, except that Church stands firm in the earliest traditions from the second century that he was the author of the Gospel called "Matthew." As a literate Jew, Matthew was well-suited to crafting His Gospel for a Jewish-Christian audience, such as existed in Antioch of Syria. His Gospel clearly delineates with

frequent quotations from the Old Testament how Jesus Christ fulfills the Messianic promises in the Hebrew scriptures.

Tradition says St. Matthew preached throughout the Middle East and is venerated as a martyr, though some early writers, such as Clement of Rome, assume he died a natural death. Christian art shows him as a man with a book or scroll, and often with an angel dictating to him.

Today we venerate St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, and give thanks for the witness of his Spirit-inspired Gospel. Matthew's Gospel demonstrates the need for repentance, steadfast love, and obedience to our Lord, Jesus Christ. And to God be the glory as we follow in the Master's steps, seeking "treasure in heaven" with penitent and merciful hearts. *Amen*.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, honor and dominion, as is most justly due this day, both now and forever, Amen.