

# Festival of St. Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)

Ezekiel 2:8-3:11 - Ephesians 2:4-10 - Psalm 119:33-40

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**What can Lutherans do with a festival anyway?** Is it an occasion to teach about Matthew in general as opposed to this one specific text? There are two problems. First, little is known about Matthew other than the book bearing his name. Even if one assumes he was one of the twelve, there are not even "reliable legends" about what he did after Easter. Secondly, the various facts about the Gospel of Matthew that come to mind ("the Jewish gospel", his alleged location among Syrian Jewish-Christians, etc.) are simply alleged facts - and not good news.

**Themes in Matthew that might be good news** To preach about Matthew perhaps one could use themes of Matthew's gospel as points for a sermon proclaiming the good news according to Matthew:

- **Jesus as teacher** - Matthew with the sermon on the mount and the four other long discourses seems to emphasize Jesus as someone who isn't only a miracle worker or provider of eternal life, but also one who has wisdom about how to live our lives day to day.
- **Jesus fulfilling God's promise of salvation** - The many references to the formula: "all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (1:22, 2:15, 2:17, 2:23, 3:14, 4:14-6, 12:17-21, 13:14, 13:35, 21:4-5, 26:56, 27:9-10) provide proof that we should keep the faith and continue to hope in God.
- **Righteousness** - Various stories that focus on righteousness (1:19; 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 13:36-43; 21:28-32; 21:33-44; 23:23-24) proclaim God's demands on the Christian disciple.
- **Living in a mixed community of sinners and disciples** - Various texts focusing on the church and the larger community (5:21-4 anger with brethren; 16:18-9 upon this rock; 18:15-20 dealing with disagreements; 28:19-20); on how good and evil exist together for now (7:15-23; 18:21-22 forgiving 70 times; 20:1-16 vineyard, last hired, 13:24-30 weed and plants together) but that there will be an ultimate judgment *by God* on evil (13:36-43 sower; 14:47-50 the net; 21:33-42 taken away; 22:11-14 wedding feast; 25:1-13, 25:31-46) suggest that Matthew is concerned with ethics in a community that cannot achieve purity by removing sinners.
- **Living after the destruction** - The destruction of the temple in 70AD proved disorienting for Judaism and for Jewish Christians. Some argue that Matthew's focus on righteousness and on living in a mixed community is an attempt to find a way to live without the orientation of the temple. Perhaps our society had its temple of fixed institutions destroyed in the period 1960-75, and now needs orientation on how to live when there are no external rules to follow.

**Matthew 9:9-13** It is a dramatic story and perhaps should be simply told for its drama: Here is Matthew, stuck in a dirty, difficult job. But he has no choice, a man has to support his family after all. It would be nice to be able to talk religion all day, but you need time and money for schooling for that. And here comes the guru. Doubtless he will use the tax collector for an object lesson. The crowd gathers around eager to see their oppressor get his, deliciously anticipating the stinging rebuke that is sure to come and that wonderful feeling of self-justification that comes when someone you dislike is put in his place. But it's not fair: he's just doing what he can. Why don't they go after the big boys who really profit from this instead of taking easy shots at the flunky? And he can see people in the crowd whose business practices and family life could use some rebuking as well, why do they think he is the only sinner? And now Jesus is right in front of him. The crowd grows silent. What can Matthew do to respond? A sharp retort could cause a riot. He is trapped into bearing the humiliating response. Perhaps he should strike first and order Jesus off or call in the police. And then, Jesus speaks his stunning offer and the world tilts on its axis.

**Themes in 9:9-13** While many things can be said about the specific gospel, it is interesting to consider how a sermon on a few of the above themes could use this specific passage for examples.

- **Jesus as teacher** - here he teaches by example showing us such lessons as that the true mission of the disciple is among those who are in need (rather than staying aloofly pure), that while we think that wisdom is learning how to protect ourselves and how to keep the upper hand, that real wisdom is found in the offering of grace and the rejection of revenge. Jesus teaches how grace creates good works. Without the grace there is no way for Matthew to do any good, without the gracious offer there is no opening for Matthew to respond. Jesus is also teaching us to see virtues and gifts in unlikely people, in the people we don't ask because we "know" they don't want to help, or will refuse to help.
- **Jesus fulfilling the God's promise of salvation** - this is how salvation comes, by a gracious offer extended and accepted. We can actually watch salvation arriving.
- **Righteousness** - see how Matthew is trapped in a life of unrighteousness that he cannot escape from by his own efforts. Only by God giving him righteousness can he achieve it. The Ephesians text applies as comment on this: "by grace you have been saved ... and this is not your own doing."

#### Other aspects

- **Follow me** – follow what? Not an idea, a movement, an ideology, but Jesus. Certainly not self-interest, self-needs or self-affirmation, but God. Not the congregation's fund raising, the pastor's goals, or the leading family's complaints but the gospel.
- **God reaching out** - one commentator claims that no one would object to extending hospitality to the repentant sinner. It is in the initiative of God to one that has not yet repented that the offense lies.
- **Jesus as physician** - and the church as hospital for sinners. Jesus can move among sinners like a doctor among the sick - not as one overwhelmed by the illness, but as one who can offer help.
- **I came** - not to endorse our prejudices but to call us to mission.
- **Did Jesus know Matthew?** - if the drama of the call is correct, the question is irrelevant - Jesus' knowledge of Matthew doesn't diminish the grace of his call.