

The Feast of St. Matthew, A+D 2008

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Who... *me*?

There is a painting by the artist Caravaggio (kar-uh-VAHJ-o) that depicts the call of Saint Matthew. On the left side of the picture is a wooden table with several coins on it. The table stands in a dark room; but a shaft of sunlight illuminates it from the right side of the painting. It looks like it's about an hour before sunset. Around the table sit five men. The one in the center is Matthew. Jesus has just gestured toward him. "Follow me," he said. While the other men are disinterested, Matthew's eyes are wide with surprise, his eyebrows raised, his finger pointed sharply at himself. His expression says, "Who...me?"

We *only know* three things about Matthew's life. (1) We know that Jesus called him. (2) We know that before Jesus called him, he collected taxes for the Roman government in Galilee and he associated with... a *disreputable* ...crowd. (3) And, finally, we know that after Jesus *called* this man, he wrote the longest of the four Gospels and evangelized Ethiopia. One thing is obvious: **This call made a difference in Matthew's life.**

Do you think he understood the enormity of that moment? *Pause.* He *did* get up, leave everything, and follow Jesus. But that hasn't happened yet in Caravaggio's (kar-uh-VAHJ-ohz) painting. Matthew is frozen there in his surprise. There are five men in the room, but Jesus called him. There are many men in Galilee; but God made a choice, picked a man, singled him out, and summoned him to—to what? What was Matthew called to do? He was called to *help* the Son of God, and after Jesus' resurrection, to *speak for* Jesus to "all nations," and ultimately, to *write God's Word* so that you and I could read it today. **Jesus called Matthew to participate in God's work.**

Although Matthew's call stunned him—and his contemporaries—it is a *familiar* story to *us*. In the same way, God singled out Moses and sent him before Pharaoh, saying, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet." In the same way, God commissioned the soldier Joshua and the king David to rule in His stead. He spoke through the prophets Samuel and Elijah. And He wrote Scripture Itself through Jeremiah and Paul. **All of these familiar figures were called to do God's work in the world.**

The book of Hebrews contains a litany of their deeds. It says they “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword.” These men and women suffered persecution, performed miracles, and most were even martyred. Hebrews adds, “The world was not worthy of them.”

But here’s the interesting part: as soon as the author of Hebrews has said that, he turns his attention to you: “You are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses.” *They* are nothing less than the heroes of the faith! *They* did God’s work in the world; but you stand among them.

Are you a husband or wife? You have been singled out by God. You, husbands, and no-one else, are called to model the love of Christ to your wives. You, wives, and no one else, are called to model the faithfulness of the Church to your husbands.

Are you a mother or father? You have been singled out by God. Never mind that there are many mothers and many fathers. God has shared with you the *power* to create life itself! You—and no-one else—have been entrusted with the bodies, minds, souls, and eternal lives of your children. You alone are answerable to God for how they are raised. *Pause.*

Are you a police officer or a lawyer? Are you a voter? Have you ever been summoned to Jury Duty? Jesus once told the mob, “let the one who has no sin cast the first stone,” and God said, “Vengeance is mine.” The authority to punish sinners and criminals belongs to God; but you servants of civil law have been singled out by God to bear **that** authority. (God has called you to administer justice.) You alone are answerable to God for how it is administered. *Pause.*

Are you a farmer, grocer, bagger, or breadwinner? Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father....Give us this day our daily bread.” And David wrote in one of the Psalms, “the eyes of all look to you: ...and you give them their food in due season. But God has singled you out and called *you* to answer that prayer. *Pause.*

The Pharisees once attacked Jesus for forgiving a paralytic’s sins. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” they asked. And they were right: That authority *does* belong to God alone; but he forgives sins publicly through Pastor Hemmer and he has summoned you to forgive them in your daily lives. Do you have friends, family members, or neighbors who have done you wrong? God has singled you out to forgive them in His name. You alone are answerable to God for how you show mercy.

These are *awfully* big shoes for us to fill. I imagine some of you don’t quite know how you landed in those shoes—perhaps your firstborn was a surprise or marriage turned out to be... *bigger* than you’d

thought going in. But it's no mystery to God how you got here. He chose you—singled you out, called you, and put you here.

Others of you have wondered long and hard what God's plan for your life might be. But it's no mystery: you're looking at it. God has called you to the responsibilities you face today and He intends that you to carry them out faithfully. There *is* some comfort in that: there is no secret plan for us to guess at; God isn't playing games with us; but our work is certainly cut out for us.

Six hundred years before Matthew's call, a priest stood beside a canal in Babylon. He wasn't alone; he was surrounded by other Israelites. Most of them were new to Babylon, dragged there five years before when Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem. They were exiles. The priest's name was Ezekiel. And God singled him out: "I am making you a watchman over the house of Israel," He said. "If you do not warn a wicked man to correct his ways, I will hold *you* accountable for his blood."

Pause. To say the least, Ezekiel's work was cut out for him.

But God did not want Ezekiel to fail. God never sets his people up for failure. Instead, he fortifies us, sustains us, fills us up. Instead of setting us up to fail, he gives us His Word, saying, "Eat this scroll." God said to Ezekiel, "Eat this scroll" and He actually handed him a roll of pressed and glued papyrus to eat. ...How strange.

God says to us, "Eat this scroll;" but when He gives us his Word to eat and we often grit our teeth as though he'd asked us to finish our vegetables. Did you know? It's from these words that the Church learned to pray:

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...

God says, "Eat this scroll." And we may nibble on a corner of Scripture here or there. At our devotional best, we may take a bite and savor it, enjoying the flavor of an insight or two, and washing it down with Portals of Prayer. But God says, "Eat this scroll," more specifically, the Septuagint reads, "*Devour* this scroll." It's almost as though he were inviting a famished man to wolf down a meal.

Where does God expect us to get an appetite like that for His Word?

From our callings. Take five minutes of your commute this week or spend your shower thinking of the ways you speak and work on God's behalf. Consider what God expects of you as a husband or wife, son or daughter, neighbor, employer, citizen, or friend. It doesn't take long, doing this, to work up an appetite for grace.

And God is eager to satisfy that appetite. “I am the bread from heaven,” Jesus said. “Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and died; but I am the living bread.” “Come to me all who are thirsty,” he welcomed. “For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink,” he added. And then, when God’s own Son was pierced for our sins, the water of life sprang from his punctured side. And when our Lord extended himself upon the cross, he yielded up his body to lighten our labor and erase our shortcomings.

Today, as Lord he expects us to follow where He calls; but as Savior, Comforter, and Brother, he welcomes us into *his* house, prepares *his* table, and serves us *his own* broken body and spilled blood to feed and renew, to nourish and sustain from week to week. Come and eat.

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