

2nd Sunday after Pentecost (L10A) – June 7, 2026
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Over the past couple of weeks I rewatched the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, based on a book of the same name by Stephen Ambrose. It's a docudrama that follows a company of U.S. Army paratroopers in World War II from boot camp in Georgia, through the D-Day landings, the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of the concentration camps, and the end of the war. It was produced by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg following up on their previous collaboration, *Saving Private Ryan*. And like that ground-breaking movie, the HBO miniseries is notable for giving a realistic sense of what war is really like without glorifying it. The main character of the series is Richard Winters, who on D-Day finds out that his company commander and his whole staff have been killed when their plane was shot down, and so he has to take charge of the company. And he does so quickly and decisively. "Follow me," he says to his men. It's something he becomes known for, and is one of the leadership principles he later articulates: Say "follow me" and then lead from the front. He didn't command from the rear, he actually led his men into battle, out in front, taking enemy fire together with those he was leading. So, when it came to thinking about today's Gospel reading, and Jesus' opening words to Matthew, "follow me," I couldn't help but make the connection. And it's a connection that's deeper than just those words.

Before we get there, the first thing I want you to notice in today's Gospel reading is that it's got Pharisees in it. And you know what I say about Pharisees. Pharisees are us. They're the good church people of the day. They are the ones trying their hardest to be faithful to God. But they keep missing how God is at work in Jesus. The Adult Sunday School is looking at the parables of Jesus this summer with the help of a Jewish New Testament scholar who will be helping us to rethink some of the unhelpful ways that Christians have treated Jesus' Jewish opponents in the Bible, and how we have interpreted their encounters to be about God rejecting Judaism and the Jewish people. When we do that, not only do we sin against our Jewish sisters and brothers, we also miss how Jesus' words to the Pharisees apply also to us and expose our opposition to him. So come and study the parables with us. I'll have more to say in the announcements.

The second thing to notice here is that when Jesus says "follow me" to Matthew, he apparently ends up following Matthew, because the next thing we know, Jesus is having dinner with him and some other tax collectors. It's actually not clear whose house this is, but it's a good guess that it's Matthew's, or one of the tax collectors. And that's surprising. Because these are not "good people," these tax collectors. They work for the Roman occupiers. They are collaborators with the enemy. So, this isn't the same as attending a barbecue at your next door neighbor's, who happens to work for the Illinois Department of Revenue. This would be like hanging out with the local mafia. That's certainly not something good church people like us would encourage, is it? You can begin to sympathize with the Pharisees now, can't you?

The third thing I want us to notice in this reading is how Jesus teaches. And I want to connect what's going on in this reading with an earlier reading we had back at the end of January. Jesus' first public teaching in Matthew is a word for word repetition of John the Baptist's message: "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repentance, as you know, is about a change in attitude and behavior. And people responded to John. They came out to be baptized, acknowledging their need for change. But when the Pharisees show up, apparently

unrepentant, John famously gets into it with them, calling them a brood of vipers and telling them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” (And sorry to remind you, but we’re the Pharisees in that story too.) That’s important context for this story. Because I think it’s safe to assume that Jesus is talking to the tax collectors about repentance too, about how they take advantage of others to enrich themselves, and how they might “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Because when the Pharisees complain, Jesus compares himself to a doctor attending to sick patients. And he says it right in front of the tax collectors. So, for these tax collectors to willingly sit down to dinner with Jesus meant that they wanted change. And maybe that’s been true for a long time, but they saw no way out. Once a collaborator, always a collaborator. Once a pariah, always a pariah. But then Jesus calls one of them to follow him? Jesus the holy man, the successor of the holy man John? Maybe there is hope for them after all.

I’m only guessing about Jesus’ teaching with the tax collectors. But I think it’s a good guess. What I really want us to notice is how Jesus is teaching his disciples, and at the same time offering to teach the Pharisees as well. “Go learn what this means,” Jesus says to them, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” He’s quoting our first reading from Hosea, and the word “learn” here is related to the word for disciple. For the Pharisees to “learn” this lesson about mercy would mean becoming his disciples and doing what they are doing – hanging out with him and seeing what he does. Again, if we go back earlier in Matthew when Jesus calls his other disciples, he does not sit down with them to tell them things. Not at first. First, they follow him around to hear him speak publicly in the synagogues about the kingdom of heaven and then they watch him show how it’s coming near by healing all those who are sick. Now he has something to talk about with them in his Sermon on the Mount, which comes right after that. Here in our reading today, Jesus signals that people like tax collectors are sick and in need of healing, and that this is the kind of mercy God is about with us, and the kind of mercy God is looking to be paid forward. And then Jesus is off to do more healing. First, he follows the synagogue leader to his daughter who has died. On the way he heals a woman who has been sick for 12 years. And then he continues to Jairus’ house and brings his dead daughter back to life. If those are examples of mercy, of the Kingdom of Heaven coming near, I don’t know what is.

What does all of this have to do with us? Well, pretty much everything. But maybe two things in particular. When Jesus calls us through our baptism to follow him, he is also following us into the particulars of our lives, just as he followed Matthew and Jairus home to address their deepest needs. He is the kind of leader who is fully invested in his followers, and who faces with us everything we face, enduring with us the onslaughts of sin, death, and evil, and on the cross he blazes a trail through death to resurrection life. Second, following Jesus is learning like the disciples learned, by hanging out with Jesus, and watching how God’s mercy is at work in him. Of course, we can’t hang out with Jesus exactly like his first disciples did. But he is present to us just as he was present to them in our persistent exposure to God’s Word and Sacraments, through which Pharisees like us learn what it means that God not only desires mercy, but is working mercy in us and through us for the sake of the world. And that’s how repentance becomes possible for us, and how the fruit of repentance gets born in us, opening our eyes and our hearts to the world around us.

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.