

September 27, 2020 New Beginnings Pt. 2 Matthew 9:1-12

A fundamental thing about new beginnings is they always involve doing things differently. This is only our second service as a church reopening after the first wave of Covid-19. And we are doing things differently for the safety of everyone who attends. The service is shorter by normal standards. We are not singing the words of hymns because breathing deeply to sing means we propel more droplets around the room. And I am committed to getting you out of this sacred, but inside space sooner than I would do in so called normal times. What I want you to see and understand is that new beginnings require doing life differently than we would in a Covid-19, free world. The Lutherans are not opening their churches until October by order of their bishop. Caution, is the watchword of these times.

At the beginning of Matthew chapter 9, Jesus had crossed the Sea of Galilee in a boat to his own town. This is Capernaum which became the headquarters for Jesus ministry in the Galilee region. He healed a man who was paralyzed. And the teachers of the Law, the Pharisees, Old Testament Bible scholars were critical of what he said to the paralyzed man. Jesus home in Capernaum was actually Peter's mother-in-law's house. Peter and James and John are among the first to be called to discipleship. In Matthew 9:9-13 Matthew is added to what will become the circle of 12 disciples.

The disciples of Jesus are making new beginnings. By definition that means they are doing things differently than they used to. They are coping as we are coping with changed circumstances. And their changed circumstances are radical. Peter, Andrew, James and John had been fishermen. They sold what they caught in the village of Magdala, where there was what we would call a fish plant. They cleaned the fish they bought from fishermen, salted and dried them, and by means of the Roman road system exported fish all over the Empire. In other words the fishermen made a decent living. They could sell everything they caught. The Empire was hungry for “St. Peter’s fish”. Remember this: at Jesus invitation they left their boats, their gear, their “secure” careers, their profitable business, to follow HIM.

Matthew too!. He was a tax collector. What that means is that he was not about to win anyone’ praise as a popular person. First of all, he worked for the Romans. Secondly, what he collected was not just the tax levy of the Empire of Rome. His was a cost plus program. He collected the necessary, legally enforced taxes, plus a commission which he was allowed to determine. And there is no question, some of the tax collectors gouged the people royally. They took what the market could bare. And their imposition of the tax levy plus fees, was enforced by the Roman legions occupying this province of the Empire.

Jesus said, “Follow me.” And Matthew left his booth, the office he had either paid for or rented, and did just

that. He followed Jesus. In fact it cost him money to do so. Matthew was so impressed by Jesus he was willing to obey Him. He lost his profitable business, and he lost the safety of the Empire's protection. And then he hosts this huge party in his own home, inviting anyone who wanted to hear Jesus or meet HIM to attend. He fed them all. He provided wine for them all. Matthew has put his money where his mouth is in terms of being with Jesus, and the circle of disciples that he has joined. I use the word joined loosely. Jesus chose every one of these men. Matthew submitted to being chosen to work that did not pay. Like the others he has left...everything. Eventually he would lose the house. The tradition of the Church (in other words there is no documentary proof of this) that he died a martyr's death in Ethiopia.

Given Matthew's past, the Pharisees who are present, after all there was free food and drink, and Matthew did not skimp when he entertained, the Pharisees asked the other disciples, "Why does your teacher eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" They are offended that they have come to this gathering, where there are such people. The free food does not mean they like the company. And the disciples, including Peter, James, John and Andrew shared this intelligence with Jesus.

Jesus is not shy about sharing his reasons for being with this crowd. In fact he is not apologetic for being with these kinds of people, tax collectors and sinners. You see the working out of what we already know. Jesus is about new beginnings.

And that means you do things differently than the traditions and rules that made the Pharisees comfortable. “It’s not the healthy that need a doctor,” said Jesus, “it’s the sick.” He quotes the Old Testament to the Old Testament scholars: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” God the Almighty wants mercy, not sacrificial ritual. (Hosea 6:6) And Jesus presents them with an astounding equation concerning what HE is doing. Having said what God wants, Jesus adds, “For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

New beginnings. They start with recognizing who we are, what we are, where we are. It is true to say we are here because we are trying to do the right thing, to do what God wants us to do. But the fact is we are not here because we know or think we know we are good.

I am not here because I think I am righteous. The fact is we gather and gather together when it is possible to do so, because we know we need healing. And our illness is not Covid-19. It is something more basic and something worse. We know in our heart of hearts, in the place where we dare to face reality, that we are sinners, lost but for the mercy, the love, and the grace of God.

It is dangerous to say that one verse of Scripture is more important than the rest, and it is dangerous to paraphrase a verse, because the kernel of truth in the original is then in danger of being lost. But I will say it this way. John 3:16 encapsulates the heart of what Jesus teaches, what HE did, what HE does. “For God so loved the world (including us), that

he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) That is why I stand here. I believe that is why you come and gather in HIS name. We continually want to make a new beginning. In Jesus Christ we may and we can. And that means being open to doing this differently.

Let us pray;

Lord we thank you for those who left what they had been doing, to do something new, to do life differently, following where you would lead. In YOU we have the hope of life even though we may die in the process. Most of us are aware that we are closer to the finish line than we are to the beginning. Or, Lord to put it differently, we are closer to the real beginning than we are to where we started. Lead us. Strengthen us. Protect us and those whom we love. In the wonderful name of Jesus, we pray. Amen