



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

### Pentecost 2 (Proper 5), Year A

[RCL] Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; **Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26**

#### Opening Prayer |

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

#### Context |

The Gospel of Matthew was written by a Jewish author to a primarily Jewish audience, likely between 80-85 CE. This community—and this author—still identified as Jewish, and so this gospel portrays Christ as the long-awaited Messiah, sent by God to fulfill the Jewish scriptures. This emphasis is seen in the large amount of Old Testament scripture quoted in the gospel—more than the other canonical gospels—to prove that Jesus is the promised Messiah. The gospel traces Jesus’ genealogy through the great Jewish king David back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith (Matt 1:1). The Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as the “new Moses,” drawing parallels between Jesus, who is sent to deliver humanity from sin (Matt 1:21), and Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt. Matthew’s gospel depicts Jesus as observant of Jewish law, while frequently at odds with the Pharisaic leaders over its interpretation.

Most scholars agree that the writer of Matthew uses Mark’s gospel as a source, but elaborates upon it extensively. This gospel places a heavy emphasis on Jesus as a teacher, with five large sections devoted to Jesus’s teachings, thereby mirroring the five books of the Pentateuch, the Old Testament books traditionally ascribed to Moses. The most famous of these sections is the Sermon on the Mount, which takes up four whole chapters (Matt 5-8) preceding the section where today’s reading is found. While Mark’s gospel depicts Jesus performing many miracles, Matthew’s gospel condenses those mostly to two chapters and uses them to illustrate the nature of discipleship. The ten miracles told across these two chapters recall the ten miracles of Moses in Egypt, another example of the parallels drawn in this gospel between Jesus and Moses (see Exod 7:14-10:29; 12:29-32). Today’s reading comes in the second of these miracle chapters of Matthew.

#### Theological Reflection |

To make sense of today’s gospel reading, we don’t have to look further than the common experience playing out in most high school cafeterias, where students often group themselves at tables by cliques: the band kids at one table, the athletes at another, and so on. It’s rare to see different groups of students

mingling together. Teenagers know that to eat with someone means to say “these are my people,” and to sit with people outside one’s “group” would be to upset the social order.

A similar understanding of eating with others existed in Jesus’s day, and the first part of today’s reading shows some Pharisees upset about who Jesus is eating with for similar reasons: because eating together claims kinship and community. The trouble begins in verse nine, when Jesus calls Matthew as his disciple while Matthew is “sitting at a tax booth.” (Tradition long held that this Matthew was the same as the author of this gospel, but modern scholarship cannot confirm this association.) Tax collectors were widely despised because they had a reputation of exploiting people, collecting more than was due to pad their own pockets. Jesus still says to Matthew, “follow me,” and Matthew “got up and followed him” (v. 9).

Matthew is not the only tax collector with whom Jesus associates. In fact, he then goes to dinner (possibly at Matthew’s house; the text is unclear) with “many tax collectors and sinners” (v. 10). These people were social and moral outcasts. The social custom that held eating with someone as a way to bring them into one’s circle worked in both directions. If an accepted member of society in good standing dined with someone from beyond the accepted circles, their own reputation would be challenged by association. Eating with the despised group of tax collectors served as a mark against Jesus’s honor and reputation—which is why some Pharisees challenge his disciples, questioning Jesus’s actions (v. 11). The Pharisees upheld strict religious and social boundaries, and tax collectors dwelt outside those boundaries.

Jesus answers their concern with a proverb that emphasizes his mission, contrasting the outcasts who recognize their need for grace with the self-righteousness of these religious leaders (v. 12). In verse 13, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, a reminder that God’s nature is to be merciful and to offer grace, telling the Pharisees to “go and learn what this means.”

The lectionary then skips to verses 18-26 where we get two intertwined healing stories. Both healings happen to people who would have been considered outsiders in different ways. First, “a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him” pleading for his dead daughter (v. 19). While the previous scene shows religious leaders being suspicious and critical of Jesus, this leader recognizes Jesus’s authority and power, and Jesus grants the man’s request to resurrect his daughter, a foreshadowing of the resurrection Jesus makes possible for all. The opposition of the Pharisees in the earlier scene is contrasted with the faith of this leader. Despite his position, he follows Jesus, becoming part of his movement.

In the middle of this story, another healing takes place. “A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years” approaches Jesus as he is following the religious leader to his home (v. 20). Her health issue would have meant that she was considered unclean according to Jewish law, leaving her cut off from most of society (Lev 15:25-27). Even without that issue, by societal norms it would have been considered inappropriate for a woman to approach a man as she does. And yet Jesus breaks with convention in his response to her. She touches Jesus’s cloak, and he commends her, saying, “take heart...your faith has made you well” (v. 22).

One small note on the text, which might be inviting (literally). The Greek word translated as “called” in verse nine, when Matthew is “called,” can also be translated as “invited.” The theme of invitation runs through today’s stories. In each of the scenes, Jesus invites outsiders—tax collectors, sinners, religious leaders from opposing groups, and a woman who was considered unclean—to become insiders. He invites them into relationship and community.

Jesus doesn't just invite people to follow him; he also follows them in turn. He follows Matthew to dinner. He follows the religious leader to his daughter's bedside. And he follows the woman's lead as she approaches him for healing.

This important dynamic shows that a relationship with Jesus is like a relationship with a friend: one of mutuality. Jesus meets the people where they are in life and follows them to the place of their need. Humans, like teenagers in a high school cafeteria, have a tendency to exclude outsiders and those who are different. The scenes in today's reading remind us that Jesus invites all of us to become part of his community.

### For Reflection |

- When or where in your life have you sensed Jesus saying, "follow me"?
- Have you ever had a moment where you felt more like the Pharisees in this story, confounded and concerned by the communities Jesus creates?
- When have you been an outsider who experienced the grace of being invited into community?
- Where or when has Jesus followed *you* in your life?

### Faith in Practice |

Following Jesus's example, interact with someone you wouldn't regularly engage. Offer an act of hospitality to someone in need, sit with someone new at coffee hour, or make small talk with a stranger in the grocery line. Think of it as a practice of the Baptismal Covenant: to seek and serve Christ in all persons. How does Christ invite you in that moment, and how does he follow you as you enter?

***Brandon Medley** is a candidate for the priesthood in the Diocese of Georgia. He is a senior in the hybrid M.Div. program at The General Theological Seminary and currently serves at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Valdosta, Georgia. He works as an elementary school behavior interventionist. Brandon enjoys sharing life with his wife, Elizabeth, and their two dogs, Fred and Betty. He enjoys hiking, birding, and Star Wars.*



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