

## ***Matthew/Levi: A Disciple with a Past***

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
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*Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, (14 March), 2010.*

The fifth sermon in the Lenten series *Old Disciples and New*.

Text: Luke 5:32 “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” ~Jesus

As did so many in the Bible, today’s disciple had two names.<sup>1</sup> His Jewish name was Levi, but in the early church he came to be known as Matthew. The three gospels do not tell us much about his call: only that Jesus passed a tax collector by the fishing piers of the Sea of Galilee and told Levi to follow him and he did.<sup>2</sup> The accounts also tell us that he threw a dinner party for Jesus after he became his disciple. Levi invited some of his old friends, other tax collectors and the like, to meet Jesus. That caused the good people in Capernaum to talk about Jesus’ choice of friends. Jesus came to the dinner despite the offense it caused, for, he said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

I spent much of the weekend working on my taxes, so let me just say I have some sympathy for the Pharisees who pointed out the oddness of Jesus’ choice of Levi! In that culture a Jewish tax collector like Levi was a collaborator with Rome. Such tax officials routinely got all they could extort, especially from the poor and powerless. As he sat in his booth by the lake, when the fishermen brought their baskets of fish ashore, Levi would take a few—probably the better ones—and sell them to extract a tax on their catch. Can you imagine the fishermen’s arguments with him? “*Not that one! You have taken too many! How can I make a living?*” Tax collectors did not work as everyone else did. They just sat and took a portion of the crop or catch. They sent part to the government and kept the rest for themselves. You can imagine the resentment. They also tended to make a very good living and all of this ostracized them from their neighbors.

Levi-Matthew is associated with the first Gospel, but we do not know for sure that he wrote it. Given the probability that we will never know for sure, let us just assume the author of Matthew is the same disciple as Levi. If that is the case, one of the obvious facts about the author is that he knew his Scriptures. He quoted the Old Testament throughout his gospel, at every turn. That makes the man even more interesting to me. Where did he learn it? Not only did he have this most Jewish of names, but he must have had a thorough Jewish upbringing and education at his synagogue, probably the same one these fishermen disciples attended. Picture how this

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<sup>1</sup> Simon/Peter, Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, Saul/Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Also Matthew 9:9-13 and Mark 2:13-17.

friction played out in the small group of disciples around Jesus! The choice of Levi must have bothered them as much as it bothered the Pharisees. Yet, Jesus saw something in the man that others had either missed or forgotten. However, Levi, too, must have been ready for a change. My guess is he was still active in the synagogue but sat in the back of the room off to the side. He would have seen Jesus' exorcism of the man the previous Sabbath, known about Simon's mother-in-law, overheard Jesus teaching by the lake, witnessed the healing of the leper, and perhaps even seen the friends of the paralyzed man drop him through the roof for Jesus to forgive his sins and help him walk.<sup>3</sup> Though Levi made a very good living at his tax office, something was missing in his life. Those who criticized Jesus also complained about Levi's business practices. They were the ones who caused Levi to sit in the back of the synagogue each Friday night. It is important, however, to understand why the Pharisees were so surprised by Jesus' choice of this disciple. They really were good people and like all good people they had a strong opinion that people like Levi never really change. I wonder if Levi was also surprised when Jesus stopped before the booth and looked him in the eye and invited him to be a disciple? "Follow me," is all he said. The text records no conversation between the two. It only says, "And he left everything and rose and followed him."<sup>4</sup>

When you read the literature about discipleship a word that keeps recurring is *surrender*. Not every call to be a disciple involves so dramatic a life change as did Levi's. My friend Dan Warner used to talk about his call as if he were a drowning man and Jesus threw him a life ring. Dan said he thrashed around in the water for quite a while before he reluctantly took hold of the ring and let Jesus pull him into his boat. He said he was so intent on saving himself, he almost didn't take Jesus up on the offer. Only when he felt as if he were going under for the last time did he grasp the ring. Pride can be a terrible thing. Deciding to accept Jesus' offer to follow does seem like *surrendering* to many like my friend Dan. Given Matthew's lifestyle and work, his decision to follow Jesus must have also felt like surrendering. We are so sure we can do it by ourselves. We resent all those happy, smiling people who, we imagine, think themselves better than we. But to be forgiven a sin is like surrendering. Afterwards, we inevitably must give great loyalty to the one who forgave us. We understand that *quid pro quo* and that is the reason it is so much like *surrender*. It will mean a new set of values, a new set of friends, even a new life. But when you are drowning in self reproach and anxiety and all the money in Galilee will not help you, Jesus' offer of following looks very good, even with the changes that he will require.

As we read the Gospel of Matthew, there are hints in what Levi already knew from the Torah that he was prepared for Jesus. Does becoming a disciple of Jesus means forgetting who you are *entirely* and becoming someone new? On one level, yes, but on another, no. Discipleship seems like a huge change, but the one who will become a follower of Jesus is the same person before and after. The only difference is faith and Christ's new faith in you. When Jesus said, "I

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<sup>3</sup> These stories all precede the call of Levi in Luke. See Luke 4:31-5:26.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 5:26.

have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,” we make assumptions that the change is total, complete, black and white. But there is continuity as well as change. Levi brought much of what he had with him when he became Matthew the disciple. Psychologically it was impossible not to.

My friend Kathy H. was originally from Pennsylvania and a good Lutheran. She moved to the coast of Maine with her fishing husband where I used to be a minister. There was no Lutheran church in town, and as they began to have children she brought them to our church school. She couldn't quite bring herself to join the Congregational Church. Being a Lutheran reminded her of her family and her childhood. It was part of who she was, and she didn't want to lose it. I kept after her to join the Congos. “Kathy,” I told her, “you will always be a Lutheran because that is who you are. Just because you become a Congregationalist, doesn't mean you have to stop being Lutheran.” So, she joined my church. After she took the step, it probably didn't seem that big a deal. While Levi's jump was much farther than Kathy's,<sup>5</sup> I think you can see my point. In discipleship the person before and after is still the same. What is different is not the person but the one you follow. You will always be yourself, maybe even more yourself after following Jesus. He is, after all, the one who made you.

Yet there are also changes when you walk over this threshold to follow Jesus. I wonder if that is what this disciple's two names signify. He was still Levi but also now Matthew. Some of the other disciples remembered an old Levi, an even older one than the one who badgered them by the shore for taxes and had his head turned by riches. Peter, Andrew, James and John remembered the young Levi with whom they had studied the scriptures growing up. Jesus apparently remembered that Levi, too, and called him to be his disciple.

Is it the same with you? Once, you said yes to Jesus' invitation. Or perhaps you are still considering it. What holds you back? Your past? Might you be willing to let him take your hand and see what the two of you can do together, with the rest of us, in this church, his contemporary band of disciples? “*Follow me.*” None of us is perfect, but then again, he came not to call the perfect but the imperfect. All of us have a past, but do you want to stay in the past or follow Jesus into somewhere new? He still tenders his offer: “*Follow me.*”

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<sup>5</sup> After all, Kathy was already a disciple.