

Year A Proper 10 "Follow Me. Yes or No" Matthew 9 vv9 to 13 and 18 to 26

"Follow me," says Jesus. We begin with Jesus calling another person to be his disciple. He has called Peter and Andrew while they were busy casting out their fishing nets. He has called James and John while they were busy mending their fishing nets. Now he has called Matthew while he was busy doing his job as a tax collector. "Follow me." Each one of them immediately stopped what they were doing and answered Jesus' call. It's not that they didn't have anything else to do. They were busy. It's that they realized they didn't have anything more important to do. This is a crucial detail for each of us to note because every single one of us has, at some point, perhaps quite often, pushed aside a call from Jesus because we believed we had something else that we needed to do instead or, worse yet, we couldn't be bothered. We may have pushed aside going to worship, attending a church function, daily prayers, bible study, or even a call to a different vocation or act of relationship building. Whatever it may be, we are guilty of believing we are too busy for God, guilty of – at least sometimes – putting God low down on our list of priorities.

Yet God has called us – each one of us – and continues to call us, continues to encourage us to stop what we are doing, to move God up to the top of our list and Jesus tells us why. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," he says, "but those who are sick." Jesus has come to heal. He has come not for the righteous, but to call sinners. That's us. Every one of us – we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul tells us. We are all in need of healing. Remembering that sin is the turning away from God, the lack of a relationship with God, it is quite obvious that we are not yet perfect. We strive for perfection -

the perfect relationship with God – perfect relationship meaning that we have nothing but love in our hearts for God, for each other, for the planet. Jesus continuously calls us to this: Follow me, he says. Follow me into healing. Each time God beckons to us, we have an opportunity to grow in our perfection – to become more Christlike, to be closer to God, to fill ourselves up with God’s love. Jesus continuously calls to us and we continuously pass up on many of the opportunities God puts in front of us.

I was talking to a gentleman a couple Mondays ago at an interment who said to me that, at a very young age, he experienced a sense of joy and accomplishment in helping someone in the hospital bed next to a loved one he was visiting. He did not pursue this experience – holding down numerous other jobs instead he now feels that he missed his calling, a calling to a life of caregiving. It is never too late to heed a call to love others. Another gentleman told me his mum had not had him baptized as a child. She had waited, saying he should be old enough to decide for himself but then other things kept getting in the way and baptism kept getting pushed aside. At age 36 he was baptized. It is never too late to heed God’s call to a life of love in the service of others. Jesus came to heal and to call us into a life of healing. As we have been talking a lot about lately, we have each been given gifts in order to do this – we have gifts to use to reveal God’s kingdom and build the body of Christ. This means filling our lives with the building of loving relationships and speaking and acting against things in our world that do not build loving relationships.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” Jesus tells us. He was calling out the hypocrisy of those around him, calling out those who did the bare minimum...sacrificing the

lamb but not living a life of sacrifice, saying the prayers but not living the prayers, following the rules but not going beyond. It is easy, for example, to put a can of soup in a collection bin for the food bank, much more difficult to go to the soup kitchen and ladle out soup into someone's bowl. We need both of those things. It is very important and very generous to fill the food collection bin. We also need people who are "boots on the ground" – doing what they are able and what they are called to do. I see people doing this. I am mending and healing alongside people in the Soo and in this parish who are mending and healing, building loving relationships.

"I desire mercy." Mercy is giving...giving of material things perhaps but, mostly, mercy is the giving of self...your love, your compassion, your kindness. Giving of love and compassion and kindness takes time and energy. Mother Teresa says that if giving doesn't hurt then you are not doing it right. We mustn't be afraid to hurt a little although we also must be careful that we do not hurt too much.

Don't be afraid to hurt a little. Right on the heels of telling us that he desires us to give mercy, Jesus provides some life-saving knowledge. We do not do it alone. I desire mercy, he says, and then he shows us what this mercy looks like – it is healing. Jesus comes to heal. **Jesus** comes to heal. In both healings that we see today there is great faith on display – in the woman who knows that if she touches Jesus' cloak her bleeding will stop; in the leader of the synagogue who knows Jesus can revive his daughter with a touch of his hand. People reaching out and touching Jesus. Jesus reaching out and touching people. The people with faith ask. Jesus in faith does. We are now – at the same time – both the people who ask of Jesus in faith and the people who are Jesus doing in faith – the power

working in us. We ask for compassion and strength and love and we give the compassion and strength and love of God working through us. You've likely heard the expression that we are the hands and feet of Jesus. Well, Jesus' body now has two and a half billion pairs of hands and feet to show mercy in the world – two and a half billion (Centre for Global Christian Study at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary; gordonconwell.edu). We are not alone. Jesus works through us and we work together.

Two and a half billion people can bring the healing of Jesus Christ into this broken world. It is healing that brings inclusion and relationship. Two people are healed today – an older woman and a young girl. The young girl was dead. The woman as good as dead. Both receive new life, welcomed back into community. That ministry of healing, welcome and inclusion, building of relationships, reconciliation...that is the revelation of God's kingdom and that is what we are called to do...and we have been given the gifts to do it. God's call is a far-reaching, wide-ranging call. Jesus shows us that today in calling a tax collector – one thought to be an immoral swindler and cheat. It is not so much what Jesus sees in us that makes us worthy. It is what he puts into us when we say yes to his "Follow me." We don't need to be perfect already – Jesus calls us into a life of ongoing transformation and it is a call we are meant to share, drawing others into God's life of love and compassion because the Holy Spirit is already there waiting to help with a nudge.

Follow me, Jesus says. We can do this – together. But Jesus never calls us **to** something without also calling us **away** from something. Some people will never enter fully into their life of discipleship because they are unable – or unwilling – to

let go of commitments and ties to the world that need to be let go. In churchland, it is often a negative attitude that needs to be let go – the “we can’t do it” thinking leads to not doing it. “We don’t have enough” thinking that paralyzes. Judgmental thinking that prevents inclusivity and welcome. The more we transform, the more these ways of thinking will fade away.

“Follow me” is not a multiple choice option, as Homiletics Professor Cleophus J. LaRue bluntly points out. It is a command to which we answer either “yes” or “no”. “The call is action-oriented,” LaRue continues, “for it requires us to live now as if the rule and reign of God had come upon us in its fullness. It requires us to live now as if the lion and the lamb were already lying down together. To live now as if adversaries had already beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. To live now as if justice had already begun to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24)” (workingpreacher.org). Prep time is minimal. On the job training is required. Follow me, Jesus says. Yes or No.