

“He Rose and Followed Him”

In the name of him who came not to call the righteous, but sinners, dear friends in Christ: I've noticed that in general people like to hear about the miracle stories of the Bible. We're especially drawn to the spectacular ones like the Red Sea opening up so that the Israelites can escape from the pursuing Egyptians, or Joshua commanding the sun to stand still for the period of an extra day, or Jesus walking on the water or calming a storm. These things are impressive stuff, to be sure, and we naturally gravitate toward them. But as wonderful as they are, I've come to realize that some of the best miracles (and certainly the ones that have most significance for us) are the ones that usually go unnoticed.

What do I mean? Well, I wonder if you caught the miracle that's recorded for us in this morning's Gospel lesson. In it we heard about the call of Matthew the tax collector to be a disciple of Jesus, and the subsequent banquet attended by many other tax collectors and sundry sinners during which Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees on account of the bad company he kept. Did you notice the miracle in that story? If not, you're not alone, because it eluded me too for quite some time.

But then it struck me that the story of call of Matthew appears in all three of what we call the synoptic Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And though these different writers sometimes change around the order of the material they're working with as they describe various episodes in the life of Jesus, and they sometimes omit a story found in one or two of the others, or they include or leave out certain details, one thing all three did was to make sure that the story of the call of Matthew came immediately after another story. It's the story in which Jesus heals a paralyzed man. It suggests that the two stories are related by more than just chronology (this happened and then that happened). In fact, as Matthew begins to tell the story of his call, he links the two together by saying, "As Jesus passed on from there" thereby strongly hinting the text we heard this morning builds on what has just happened before.

So, let's back up and consider the story of the healing of a paralyzed man. You probably remember it but, let me refresh your memory. Jesus is teaching in a house. It's filled with people. They're packed in so tight they can hardly breathe. And a huge crowd surrounds the house straining to hear what Jesus is saying by listening through the doors and windows. Along come several men carrying their paralyzed friend on a pallet. They want to get him to Jesus so that he can be cured; but they can't push through the crowd. The mob is pressed together so tightly that one person alone couldn't slip through, so there's no way for four people carrying a stretcher to do it. Undaunted in their mission to help their friend, they decide to take a more indirect route. They go up on the flat patio-like roof. It consists of wooden beams overlaid by branches and palm fronds upon which is placed several inches of packed clay. They pick their spot which they calculate to be right around where Jesus is sitting, and they start to dig. Before long they've got a rectangular hole carved out between a couple of the support beams. Then they lower their friend, pallet and all, and set him down before Jesus.

Now almost everybody there is thinking two things: first, they're thinking, I'm glad this isn't my house that's being torn apart – all except for the owner, that is, and I don't

need to tell you what he's thinking. The other thing they're all thinking is, can Jesus heal this guy or not? And to be fair, it's a tough case. The guy is a quadriplegic, probably had a bad injury to his neck that damaged the spinal cord so that he has no movement or feeling anywhere below his chin. And he's likely been this way for some time so that his limbs are thin and atrophied from lack of use. So now the crowd is leaning forward to see what's going to happen. Suspense hangs heavy in the air.

And Jesus does something totally unexpected: rather than heal the guy, he says, "Cheer up, son, your sins are forgiven." At this the crowd is aghast. They're all thinking, "No one has the authority to forgive sins except God alone. Just who does this Jesus think he is?" But knowing their thoughts, Jesus says, "So what's easier: to say your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins", he turns to the paralyzed man and says, "Rise, take up your bed, and go home." And sure enough, the guy does it. And everybody is amazed—not so much because of the healing, they've all seen that before; what astonishes them is that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins – Jesus, who, as far as they are concerned is just a man—which we know is true only in part because he's also God. But in Jesus, since he is fully human, the authority also is given to a man.

Anyway, what I'd have you see is that this episode is more than just a healing miracle; it's also an elaborate illustration of the mission and ministry of Jesus. Picture, if you will, the scene on the roof of the house as the story unfolds. The guys who carried the paralyzed man there set him to one side and begin digging this rectangular hole, and then they lower him into the darkness below. If you were standing there on the roof watching them it would look almost exactly like a burial, wouldn't it? And so it is, in a sense. Physically the man on the pallet is powerless to do anything for himself. He is in that sense *dead*. So also, *spiritually* the man is *dead* in sin. But now he's lowered into a dark tomb (as it were) – a tomb into which Jesus has preceded him. It's a picture of how Christ will die for us and our sins. Here the image is that he has gone to death and burial before us. And precisely because of his death for our sin he is able to forgive and raise us up from the dead – which is exactly what he does in this case—except in this story it's merely a picture of what will happen later in a fuller and more complete sense. But the point of the whole picture is that Jesus, through his death, burial, and resurrection, has the authority to forgive sins and the power to raise the dead.

And now, having just illustrated that, Jesus leaves the house and marches straight over to where Matthew the tax collector is performing his loathsome function. In the minds of first century Jews, tax collectors occupied a space buried deep in the filth below the bottom rung of the moral scale. They were despised both because they worked willingly for the hated Roman conquerors and because they robbed their countrymen, enriching themselves by taxing them far more than was required and then skimming what was extra for themselves. People lived in fear of tax collectors because if you offended one he could ruin you, cause you to lose your home, or force you and your children into debt slavery. And they or their spies were always lurking about making sure that they got their share of any good fortune that might come your way. And you dare not raise a hand against one of them because that would bring a swift and horrible reprisal from Roman soldiers.

Naturally, anyone who would take such a job would have been removed from the worshipping assembly, the synagogue (you might think of it as being excommunicated). Not that it would have mattered to them. They had no spiritual or religious aspirations.

By taking such a job they knew very well that they were turning their backs on their neighbors, their nation, and their God. They just didn't care. All they cared about was themselves and their present comforts and wealth. So, all in all you could say that they were the most selfish, hardened public sinners you could imagine, and they made no pretense about it. They just didn't care what people thought about them. A tax collector like Matthew thoroughly enjoyed the pleasures of sin and would have had no desire whatsoever to change his ways.

So picture him sitting at his booth in the marketplace where he assesses the value of goods and services to be sold there, generously inflating the estimated price to ensure that his own share is ample, and then he charges those who would do business accordingly – a specified percentage, which he accepts on behalf of the empire in coin only. Matthew, unlike everyone else, is dressed in the finest and softest of linens, maybe even some silk, and all very richly ornamented. Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it. He is compared to those standing in line waiting for their turn to be cheated by him rather corpulent. He obviously eats well and works little. And why should he? He can afford to indulge himself and he's got plenty of servants to run his errands and do his bidding. His manner is arrogant and imperious. He's used to giving orders and having people cower before him.

"Next!" he shouts at the cluster of browbeaten subjects before his booth. The tone of his voice is a mix of boredom and contempt. It helps him project a proper air of superiority. He almost makes it sound as if he's doing people a favor by taking the time to tax them. Up steps someone he hasn't dealt with before. Matthew doesn't bother to look up from his ledger but with his peripheral vision can see that the man before him is wearing the rough clothes of a peasant. "State your business. What are you selling?"

Silence. Irritated at being kept waiting and deciding to make this miserable wretch pay for it, he says, "Speak up, fool. What have you to declare?" Still no response.

Really riled now, at last Matthew looks up with contempt at the face of the rather ordinary man before him. He can't quite read his expression; but it contains none of the fear he's used to seeing in his "clients". But what really captivates him are the stranger's eyes. To these he locks on and finds that he cannot look away. They seem to see right through him. Somehow, he knows without being told that this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth that he's heard people talking about. He himself hasn't had time for such nonsense. Religious teachers come and go – like that fellow John everybody was running out to the desert to see a few months back. What was his message? Repent. Prepare yourself. The kingdom of God is at hand. Right. Matthew remembered crassly joking about it with some of his friends. The fools and their pie-in-the-sky kingdom. There are suckers born every minute. Matthew much preferred the very real little kingdom he was building for himself at the expense of such gullible sheep.

But now, staring into the eyes of Jesus, Matthew begins to feel uncomfortable. He senses a goodness here ... a purity ... a certain holiness that makes him feel dirty and ashamed by contrast. Beads of sweat begin to form on his forehead. He squirms a bit on his seat, but he doesn't look away from those powerful eyes. He can't. He finds that he's paralyzed with fear. And mind you, it isn't because of what Jesus has said – he hasn't said anything. It's what Matthew fears that Jesus will say. I mean, what would you expect a holy man like Jesus to say to someone like him? Harsh words, words of

condemnation, words that though unspoken were causing Matthew to tremble. Awaking in his soul were the stirrings of the conscience that he thought he had long ago seared beyond any feeling or sense of remorse. Now, in those eyes, he saw himself as God saw him. And it terrified him.

Then the expression on Jesus' face changed suddenly. Though it really couldn't be described as angry before, it brightened significantly, creases of mirth appeared at the corners of the eyes and they became more friendly and compassionate. Then came the words: "Follow me."

Just two simple words, words that were completely unexpected and filled with grace, but by them Jesus conveyed the same message that he had to the paralyzed man: "Cheer up. Your sins are forgiven." And that's when the miracle happened. Upon hearing these words, in Matthew a part of the hardened sinner died and a new person was raised to life – a person set free of the paralyzing effects and bondage of sin. To his overwhelming relief and joy Matthew understood that through this Jesus who now stood before him there was a place even for him in the kingdom that up to this point, he had scorned and rejected. And empowered by God's forgiveness in Jesus, he forsook his former way of life, and he rose and followed him.

What I'd have you understand this morning is that of the two miracles we considered, this one, though less spectacular to watch was by far the greater of the two. In the first one Jesus repaired a paralyzed body – a body which was still subject to disease, injury, and death, and to which it ultimately surrendered. In this latter miracle, Jesus gave eternal life to a soul dead in sin, and raised up for himself a faithful disciple. But not only is it the greater miracle, it's also the most common because it is the same miracle he has performed on each of us. All of us were at one time just like Matthew: entirely self-absorbed, concerned only about our own needs and comforts, and with no thought about God, his laws, or the welfare of anyone else. But by his call and word of forgiveness Jesus gave us a new life and the strength and will to stand up and follow him.

And this miracle is ongoing because as long as we are in this life a part of us that is like the old Matthew remains. That's why it's so important that we continue to look into the perfect and holy law of God so that we will honestly see ourselves as the Lord sees us. That's what terrifies the chief of sinners within and puts it to death precisely so that Christ can raise us up again with his word of forgiveness and equip us with what we need to truly obey his summons to follow and be his disciple—which, probably not coincidentally, is what the name Matthew means: *disciple*.

May Christ our Lord continue to work this miracle of saving grace on us while we remain his disciples in this life, for he will surely bring it to completion when we answer his call to rise with him in the next. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!