

Sermon Series: The 12 Disciples
#1: “Matthew: the Unlikely Disciple”
1 Timothy 1:12-17 and Matthew 9:9-13 (NRSV)
(by John Gill)

As you are well aware, we are in a presidential election season right now, and I for one will be glad when it is over. It seems like elections in America have become a circus. We shouldn't be surprised that the rest of the world looks on our election process with disbelief. I sometimes shake my head in disbelief, as well.

This isn't the first election to become a side-show. How many remember the presidential election of 2000? The whole world watched in disbelief as the election of an American president was decided by butterfly ballots, hanging chads, and dueling court decisions (not to mention the tasteless jokes about the intelligence of Floridians).

We all watched as cable news channels broadcasted non-stop about every voting irregularity and accusation. When they ran out of election officials, voters, and politicians to interview, the commentators began interviewing each other. Finally, after weeks of suspense, the US Supreme Court ruled that Bush had indeed won. The news media and public were exhausted – embarrassed by the spectacle, but relieved that the election of 2000 was finally over.

It was hoped that election would be the exception, and after that debacle our elections for president would return to “normal.” Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case. If anything, presidential elections are more chaotic than ever!

Some people say that Americans are apathetic about politics. If the election of 2000, and certainly the elections 2016 and 2020 have proved anything, they show that Americans are anything BUT apathetic! The people of America are fascinated with elections – every blip and bobble in the polls, every chad dangling precariously from every punch card, every accusation and insult hurled between the warring candidates. If anything, we've become too obsessed with the election process for our own good!

Yes, presidential elections are the #1 spectator sport in the United States. But, historically, once the drama is over and a victor has been declared and the new president begins the process of governing, the American people have tended to lose interest in the political process. In the past, we would change the channels on our TVs from CNN to ESPN, from MSNBC to CBS, from Fox News to HGTV.

But not today. Americans now engage in politics as a 'blood-sport,' like cock-fighting or bare-knuckles boxing. In recent election cycles, people have been more passionate about politics than ever – to an unhealthy extreme! I'm hoping that, in the future, we will find ways to choose our leaders with more civility and respect.

I suppose people are so zealous because they know that as soon as a president-elect has been chosen, the REAL drama begins. Decisions are made that will have far-reaching implications... choices that will have an impact on the success or failure of the new administration... and on all of our lives. And perhaps the most important decisions a new president-elect must make is the selection of the president's cabinet.

Every election-cycle when there has been a new president selected, the question immediately arises: Who will the president-elect nominate to serve in his or her inner circle? Who are the women and men he or she will seek advice from? Who are the people he or she will entrust with positions of authority – those who will have the power to act on the president’s behalf?

Indeed, the people a president chooses for his or her cabinet can tell you a great deal about his or her true nature, and what that president values most.

Yes, it’s a very important matter – this choosing of the “inner-circle.” Just think back over the years to some cabinet appointments that turned out to be disasters, and it will underscore just how critical cabinet nominations can be.

Well, Jesus wasn’t President of the United States, but he DID hand-pick an “inner-circle” – a “cabinet” if you will – twelve disciples who were closer to Jesus than anyone else on earth – even closer than his own family. And these would be the same men who would one day be entrusted with carrying the message of the Gospel to the whole world.

Yes, Jesus’ choice of his “cabinet” – his “inner-circle” – was far more significant than any appointments a president might make... because the eternal message of salvation and the future of the Church rested in the hands of these twelve men.

That’s why I have chosen to preach a sermon series on the twelve disciples. One by one, we will look at each person Jesus “nominated” to serve as his disciples, and learn how that disciple’s encounter with Christ changed his life. And as we examine his choices, we also will get a glimpse into the true nature of Jesus and what he values most.

When a president-elect begins to form his cabinet, he or she has dozens of assistants researching possible candidates for various positions, and pouring over hundreds of resumes. Only those most worthy and most qualified would be considered for these extremely important positions... (at least that’s the way it’s supposed to work!)

But what about Jesus? Did he scour the country-side looking for the most qualified people to serve in his cabinet? Did his disciples come from the religious elite? Were they noted theologians of the day? Did he interview priests and Levites in the Temple? No.

As we will see over the course of our sermon series, the men Jesus called to be his disciples were not exceptional in any way. In fact, they were quite ordinary. They had no special qualifications to be disciples – except their willingness to follow the Master.

This morning, we will look at perhaps the most unlikely candidate for discipleship – a man who was considered by his Jewish community to be a sinner and an outcast – even a traitor. It would seem that he was both unworthy and unqualified to be part of the inner-circle of Christ. Yet, Jesus called him... and he followed. His name was Matthew.

(Hear this reading of Matthew 9:9-13)

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors

and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Matthew (or Levi, as he is called in the Gospels of Mark and Luke), was a tax collector in the area around Capernaum where Jesus spent most of his ministry. Matthew was probably in charge of a customs booth, collecting duty from people traveling on the roads that pass through that region. Tax collectors in Jesus' day were even more despised than they are today, because in Roman times, they were often dishonest and greedy. The system of taxation in the Roman Empire invited corruption. Here's how it worked:

The Romans would auction to the highest bidder – what amounted to a “franchise” to collect taxes in a certain geographical area. The Romans then contracted with these “publicans” (as they were called) for a certain amount of taxes to be turned over to them; but anything over-and-above that amount, the tax collector could keep as his profit.

You can see the temptation to over-tax people and to accept bribes and payoffs! (Talk about the need for tax reform!)

As a result, the tax-collectors were often very wealthy men – and very hated. They were loathed, not only because they cheated their own people, but also because they cooperated with the Romans. They were considered traitors!

It's not surprising, then, that in the Jewish law, tax collectors are treated with great disdain: they were barred from the synagogue; they were included within lists of things and animals which were considered ritually unclean; they were forbidden to be a witness in any court case. And in the eyes of Jewish law, they were lumped together with common criminals in the same class as “robbers and murderers.”

Perhaps the most infamous tax collector in the Bible was Zacchaeus. You remember Zacchaeus, from your years in Sunday School? That “wee little man” who climbed up a sycamore tree. He was a well-to-do tax collector in Jericho, universally hated by his neighbors. Yet Jesus went to HIS house for dinner, as well! At that meal, Zacchaeus' life was changed, and he vowed to make restitution to all those he had cheated.

Now, we don't know if Matthew cheated people or not – the Bible doesn't tell us. But, even if he didn't, I think we can safely assume that he was hated and despised, none-the-less – a sinner and an outcast among his own people.

Of all the people in Galilee with whom Jesus came in contact, Matthew would be the least likely candidate to become a disciple; yet Jesus didn't hesitate to call him – and Matthew didn't hesitate to follow!

Can you imagine the scene? Matthew was a man who had chosen his lot in life. No one had coerced him into his trade as a tax collector. He sought it out – he even paid good money for his franchise! Knowing full-well that he would be rejected by his own people, Matthew couldn't resist the allure of wealth – just like many people today. He was willing to pay any price to get rich quick – and he paid a

high price, indeed. Expelled from the synagogue, treated like a pagan, and despised by everyone he met, Matthew must have been a sad and lonely man.

Day after day, week after week, he sat in his toll-booth extracting taxes from rich and poor alike, hearing them mutter curses at him under their breaths as they made their way down the road.

And then there must have been long periods of time between travelers when Matthew had the opportunity to think – to consider the kind of life that he had chosen for himself – and to regret.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could turn back the clock – to make that vocational choice all over again? How his life might have been different if he could have a second chance!

But he was trapped – branded by his community as an outcast, never to be welcomed home again. Yes, Matthew was a man to be pitied.

But one day, perhaps, as Matthew was going about his dirty business, he may have overheard a conversation between two travelers about a new rabbi going around the countryside healing people and preaching a new message, unlike anything anyone had heard before. And what's more, this rabbi had been known to show compassion on outcasts and sinners – and even to offer them a new chance at life!

Matthew's heart leaped within him. "Could it really be true? Is it possible that you can start over in life with a clean slate?" Matthew knew he had to find out.

Can't you picture Matthew leaving his post one day just long enough to slip into the outskirts of the crowd that had gathered to hear Jesus deliver his Sermon on the Mount? (Remember, Matthew is the only gospel writer who recorded the Sermon on the Mount at all – maybe he was there...)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... blessed are the persecuted... Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... Enter by the narrow gate: for the gate is wide and the ways is easy that lead to destruction... Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who builds his house upon the rock...."

What a remarkable man this Jesus was! Matthew felt drawn to him, and his soul ached to respond to the challenging message of Jesus' teaching!

But there was no hope for him. Jesus wouldn't accept him – NONE of the religious people accepted him. Why would Jesus be any different?

So, sadly, Matthew returned to his customs house, a very rich – yet very poor man... a man who had been more interested in the "treasures of earth" than in the "treasures of heaven." Oh, how gladly he would have traded all he had for a chance to start over – to choose that "narrow gate." But now his future seemed hopeless.

Then, one day – who should appear at his booth but the Good Rabbi himself! Maybe Jesus was there to pay his taxes. Or perhaps he had sensed the longing in Matthew's heart. But without anything else being said, he looked Matthew square in the eye and spoke two simple words – "Follow me." And,

according to Matthew's own account, he immediately left his money tables, and followed Jesus, never to look back.

Matthew's life was changed forever! He proved to be a faithful disciple of Jesus all throughout Jesus' ministry and beyond. According to church tradition, after the resurrection of Christ, Matthew himself had a fifteen year ministry among the Jews. He also is credited with writing down the sayings of Jesus that became the basis for the Gospel that bears his name. And like so many of the apostles, he most likely died a martyr's death because of his faith. Tradition says that Matthew was slain on the orders of the King of Ethiopia while Matthew was leading a service of Holy Communion.

This sinner and outcast – this most UN-likely of disciples – was offered a second chance at life! He finally found the “true” treasure, and became one of the most revered saints of the faith.

So, what's the good news for us from Matthew's life? Pretty simple. If an unworthy, unqualified outcast and sinner is acceptable enough to be included in the inner-circle of Christ – If Jesus would go out of his way to call a “loser” like Matthew – then there's hope for us, too.

No matter who we are – no matter how far we may have strayed from the “straight and narrow” – no matter what we may have done; this Christ, who looks at us and sees, not what we are but what we can become; this Jesus – walks up to us, looks us square in the eye, and says, simply, - “Follow me.”