

September 21, 2019
The Feast of St. Matthew and
The Ordination to the Priesthood of Derek Stefanovsky
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Proverbs 3:1-6
Psalm 119:33-40
2 Timothy 3:14-17
Matthew 9:9-13

It's so short that you might have missed it, so let me read it again: "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." That's it. That's all there is to what our Bibles helpfully identify as "The Call of Matthew."

Unless I missed it, the Gospel tells us nothing about a parish discernment committee, a commission on ministry, a standing committee, or even a bishop—sorry Bishop Todd. There's no homiletics class or middler review or CPE; no spiritual biography repeated so many times that it sounds rehearsed; no agonizing or justifying or validating. Matthew is doing his thing, Jesus says, "Follow me," and Matthew follows. It's as simple as that.

Humans tend to complicate things, but dig deeply enough and, for every Christian, it's as simple as that. Yes, for some of us, following Jesus *will* eventually involve a commission on ministry and a homiletics class and lots of validating. But strip away all the accessorizing, and every one of us is Matthew, sitting in the tax booth, trying to live our best life. We look up, and there stands Jesus.

That's the moment captured in the painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, by the Italian baroque artist Caravaggio.¹ It's an example of his mastery of chiaroscuro, the strong contrasting of dark and light. The painting depicts several men in a small room, two of them frozen in silent dialogue. With raised arm and extended index finger, the one at the right gestures toward the one at the left, inaudibly but inarguably pronouncing, "You." The one to whom he points, points back at himself; his face, lit by a beam of light, holds an expression of utter confusion, and so it's obvious what he's thinking: "Me?" The painting was completed around the year 1600, and its characters wear clothing from that period; the tax collector and his friends wear the garb of the prosperous, while Jesus and a disciple have bare feet and rough robes. It's a foreshadowing of just how drastically Matthew's life is about to change.

The rest of our Gospel reading infers a little more about Matthew's changing fortune. In short, Jesus seems not very particular about who he hangs out with, except that he seems to specialize in people of whom others are suspicious. In bringing them together, you might say that Jesus calls human questionables into the company of other human questionables. To these suspicious characters, he issues individual invitations, in order to build radical community.

I am one of the human questionables Jesus has called into the company of other human questionables. On one hand, that's a comfort: regardless of my shortcomings, even if I feel unworthy, God wants *me* at the table. On the other hand, it's also a challenge: God wants me, *and* God wants all those others, even the ones *I'm* not so sure about, because this is not a club only for human questionables who happen to be like me, and I have to be okay with that. In fact, I have to be more than okay with it, because Jesus expects me to invite even more of those others to dinner, and Jesus even expects me to *love* them. Jesus expects all that of *me*? Yes, *me*. And he expects it of *you*, too.

Here's the thing: a person's primary ordination to ministry in God's Church comes not from being made bishop, priest, or deacon; rather, it results from one's baptism. If you are baptized, Jesus is talking to you, and you are empowered to respond, by joining in God's wondrous work of reconciliation in the world.

We Episcopalians use our Baptismal Covenant to describe our basic understanding of the Christian life. *The Book of Common Prayer* is the heart of our life in community, and the Baptismal Covenant is the heart of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Remember, in the Baptismal Covenant, we make five promises based on these five questions:

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The Baptismal Covenant orders our life as Christians, and it may be more important than ever. We all know that this is a particularly difficult time for the Church. Our sociocultural setting is shifting rapidly, and churches are being forced to change. It's a time of great anxiety, but we have to let go of our fretting. What matters is that we be the hands and heart of Jesus in this world. The world needs us. The Baptismal Covenant tells us what to do. Everything else will fall into place.

I should say a little about ordained ministry. Deacons have a particular ministry of service; therefore it is deacons who by word and deed most consistently return us to our Baptismal Covenant. Derek is about to finish his brief required term as a deacon. In this changing church landscape, as we learn how better to engage with God's work in the world, we should be lifting up the ministry of vocational deacons, and priests should never forget that they were deacons first.

In contrast to deacons, priests have the particular ministry of pastor. Therefore, priesthood can never be a solo act, but rather is exercised in concert with the gathered body of Christ. This fits with something Derek said to me; he said, “My call to ministry is part of the community’s call to ministry. My priesthood derives from God, but it also derives from the community.”

The sermon at an ordination traditionally includes a “charge” to the ordinand: “Go forth and *fill-in-the-blank*.” The charge to the new priest tends to include points like these: love the flocks that you will be charged to shepherd; carefully attend to the care of your own spiritual health; trust that you are exactly what God needs wherever God leads you. Those are important things, and they’re all true. But, Derek, I expect you’ve heard them before, and you get it. I’ve known a lot of seminarians by now, and I can’t think of one more prepared than you are. It has truly been a privilege and a gift to journey with you these last three years.

And so, Derek, for you, I will instead encourage you, wherever you go and whatever you do, always to remember that your call is as simple as Matthew’s. When the path is tortuous, or when the voices of doubt fill your head, or when the fatigue of discouragement dogs your feet, let all the dross and the dregs fall away, and just remember: Jesus found *you*, Jesus said, “Follow me,” and you are following. In the days to come, through whatever comes, I hope that deep knowing can be your grounding and your comfort and your guide.

But that’s for tomorrow. For today, celebration is in the air—though it may be, Derek, that you smell mainly relief. You have spent years checking off boxes in what, when it comes to actually following Jesus, may have sometimes felt like a lengthy detour. But now, finally, the rubber hits the road, and you are ready.

I know how much Derek craves being the center of attention—which is not at all. But fortunately, while we’re here to ordain Derek, it’s not all or even primarily about him. It’s about God; it’s about the Church; it’s even about us, as representative members of the body of Christ. Yes, Derek, in a few minutes, God will make you a priest in God’s one holy catholic and apostolic Church. Allow us to celebrate. Allow us to celebrate the ways that you have already touched our lives and the lives of so many others. Allow us to celebrate your many gifts, and the ways we have already seen you carry those gifts to others. Allow us to celebrate that the Church, despite its often confounding bureaucracy, sometimes gets it right.

Derek, Jesus found *you*, Jesus said, “Follow me,” and you are following. It really is that simple, for you and for all the rest of us. *You* are visible evidence that God is at work among us; *you* are a living reminder that when one of us says, “Who, me?” Jesus replies, “Yes, yes, absolutely, yes!”

Notes

¹ "Calling of Matthew," Wikipedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calling_of_Matthew (accessed September 21, 2019).

