

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
January 21, 2024

Message by all of us, compiled by Rev. Michael Burke
[Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#); [1 Cor. 7:29-31](#); [Mark 1:14-20](#); [Psalm 62:6-14](#)



“Come, Follow Me”

In today's Gospel, in quick succession: It is announced that John the baptizer is in prison, Jesus arrives in Galilee, and announces the “Good News” that the reign of God has come near, that all should turn aside from what they are doing, and “believe,” or “be love”.

And then Jesus begins to call his disciples to come and follow him. First, Simon and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John.

So, for the first few days of the week, I gave some sustained thought to the question, “What does it mean *it MY life*, to ‘follow Jesus.’ “

But the life of a priest or congregational pastor sometimes looks a little different, in no way better; in no way ‘more faithful,’ – just “different,” so I set about instead asking those around me, in the St. Mary's community, **“What does it mean *to you* to follow Jesus in your daily life?”**

After all, even the bulletin, (on page 2) states clearly that “the ministers of St. Mary's are all the people of St. Mary's.” If you are present here today, either on Zoom, Twitch, Face Book live, or in the pews in front of me, Jesus has called YOU.

Let me say that again, clearly: If you are within the sound of my voice, Jesus has called **you to “come and follow”**.

In the Episcopal Church of old, maybe of the 1950s, that kind of language might have freaked a few people out. After all, The Episcopal Church is a Christian body, the members of whom, have a historical reputation of not using the kind of “Praise the Lord,” ‘Jesus-y’ language that some other Christian communities tend to use. And we still don't (thankfully). But over the thirty years that I have served as a priest, I have seen this denomination (and this congregation) move decidedly in the direction of taking the call to “Come, follow me,” as absolutely central to their identity.

**“What does it mean
to you to follow Jesus
in your daily life?”**

In every St. Mary's group that I have been in this past week, I have asked the question, and folks have been quick to share.

I even asked this question in this week's St. Mary's newsletter, and within an hour, responses began pouring in.

So, today's message, *to you*, has been brought to you *by you*, the people of St. Mary's. I have stitched together what you all have shared with me, that I might share it with the whole body. I have edited out people's names and personally identifiable information, largely out of practicality – so I wouldn't need to play phone or text-tag with a dozen or more people asking permission, and I inserted a thought or two of my own, in the form of a few connecting sentences to stitch it all together. Here it is:

“What does it mean *to you* to follow Jesus in your daily life?”

“When I think about the passage in Mark's Gospel, of Jesus calling the disciples, I wonder about the “back story.” What encounters with Jesus had these fishermen had previously? Had they heard him preach, or teach? Had they been thinking about the greater purpose of their own lives? What had Andrew already told them about Jesus?”

“When I think about my own call to follow Jesus, I thinking in terms of centering my life in God rather than forsaking my life. I remember that Episcopal theologian and laywoman Verna Dozier said that we were all called “to worship God, but to follow Jesus.”

“I center my life in my call to follow Jesus by setting time in my busy schedule to think about what God has given me, and to ask Jesus to show me what following him means in the next twenty-four hours. When I intentionally do that, I find he keeps showing up in unexpected ways.”

“When I think about this question, I immediately think about Jesus's conversation with the rich young man.¹ After some back-and-forth, where the young man kept pressing Jesus more, Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” I don't feel called to give up all that I have, but I do wonder seriously of how my own pursuit of wealth and comfort keeps me from following Jesus into situations and circumstances that require and build up in me, a lot of faith.”

“In Malawi right now is the time of Njala, the season of hunger.² They have a subsistence economy, and now is the time that last year's crops storage is beginning to dwindle, and this year's crop is still months away. When we were there, a friend came to us and we remarked that he was so thin. We asked if he was ill. No, he said, it is njala, the time of hunger. When, he asked us, is the njala season in your country?”

“To me, following Jesus begins with being honest about my doubts. CS Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, talks about how doubts are the foundation of our faith, and doubt is nothing to fear.”

“I try to show up each and every day looking for ways I can address injustice and relieve suffering. I intentionally form relationships with people who have different beliefs, backgrounds, and skin colors from my own, and I work to develop long-term relationships with them. I am mindful in my interactions about when I should lead and when I need to support and provide input but not be in the lead.

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_rich_young_man and the [Gospel of Matthew 19:16–30](#), the [Gospel of Mark 10:17–31](#) and the [Gospel of Luke 18:18–30](#).

² See: <https://malawichildredivillage.org/njala-update-2018/>

I try to create time and space so that I am not always busy with my own agenda but I can stop and listen and give my whole attention to others: sometimes that is in making eye contact and saying hello as I pass someone on the street, sometimes it is in giving someone a hug who I haven't seen in a while, sometimes it is in listening to my children, sometimes it is sitting quietly alone and listening to God and my own thoughts. I try to recharge myself frequently to safeguard my physical and mental health. I am grateful for each and every day I have of my life and the incredible network of caring, wonderful people I am privileged to know and live among."

I have been going to St. Mary's for one year now as of this month. I began to follow Jesus again in my life. My partner and I had coffee one Sunday after church and they asked "what did you pray for?" I replied, "that you find peace." I followed Jesus, and my partner followed me, and a peace emerged. We feel loved and know we are truly welcomed by the community.

For me, following Jesus is part of the story. But the other compelling image I have is that of the Lord himself, running after the one who seeks direction. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, powerfully running after the lamb."

"As I think about my life following Jesus, I always think about "Now, where is he going?" Jesus is usually heading off to find someone in need. If I follow Jesus, he leads me to that person, who is suffering, lost, in need of comfort or understanding or justice. Then Jesus looks at me, smiles, and says, My Spirit will remain here with you. But you take it from here. Then he is off running again, in search of the next one.

I try to follow Jesus in my life each day, but I never do so alone. I remember how one of our priests, Ted Cole, used to remind us, "We don't all have to do *everything*. That's why we live in community. That's why we support our faith community. It is *together*, that we are the body of Christ, the hearts and hands of Jesus in this time and place."

Thank you, especially to those who have permitted me to share their words today.

Friends, If I haven't already, I would love to hear from you. I can be reached at < Michael@Godsview.org >.

Better yet, discuss it also with one another and give expression to your faith, doubts, joys, and struggles.

This week, I invite to keep the question foremost in your heart and mind:

"What does it mean *to you* to follow Jesus in your daily life?"

Jesus and the Rich Young Man

From Wikipedia:

"In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the discussion is set within the period when Jesus ministered in [Perea](#), east of the [River Jordan](#). In Matthew, a rich young man asks Jesus what actions bring eternal life. First, Jesus advises the man to obey the commandments. When the man responds that he already observes them, and asks what else he can do, Jesus adds:

If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in [heaven](#). Then come, follow me.

Luke has a similar episode and states that:

When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the [eye of a needle](#) than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

The non-canonical [Gospel of the Nazarenes](#) is mostly identical to the [Gospel of Matthew](#), but one of the differences is an elaboration of this account. It reads:

The other of the rich men said to him "Master, what good thing shall I do and live?" He said to him "Man, perform the law and the prophets." He answered him "I have performed them." He said to him "Go, sell all that thou hast and divide it to the poor, and come, follow me." But the rich man began to scratch his head, and it pleased him not. And the Lord said to him "How can you say 'I have performed the law and the prophets'? seeing that it is written in the law 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,' and look, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are clad with dung, dying for hunger, and your house is full of much goods, and there goes out therefrom nought at all unto them." And he turned and said to Simon his disciple, sitting by him, "Simon, son of John, it is easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle than a rich man into the kingdom of the heavens".

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Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ?

'Cause I can believe and not change a thing

But following will change my whole life.

- Bryan Sirchio, "Follow Me")

“Follow Me (87 times) - By Bryan Sirchio

I met this preacher from Australia
 He read the Bible searching for its dominant themes
 And he counted 87 times when Jesus said... "Follow me."
 Well you know that got me thinking
 Maybe that's the bottom line of what "Christian" means
 'Cause "I follow Jesus" is deeper than "I believe"
 'Cause it don't take much to mentally agree
 With a set of beliefs written down in some creed
 Now don't get me wrong,
 we need to know what we believe
 But lately I've been wondering...

(Chorus)

Am I following Jesus, or just believing in Christ
 'Cause I can believe and not change a thing
 But following will change my whole life
 He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
 Or believe in me I'm the 2nd person of the Trinity
 But 87 time he said... Follow me

But if I'm a follower of Jesus,
 Then why am I such a good life insurance risk?
 And why, when I do my giving,
 do I still keep so much when so much hunger exists?
 And if I follow Jesus, then why do I have so many friends
 among the affluent, and so few among the poor?
 And if I follow Jesus,
 why do missiles and guns make me feel more secure?
 And it don't take much to mentally assent
 To a statement of faith we can confirm and forget
 But following will change our lifestyle if we get it and
 more and more I'm wondering...

Are we following Jesus? Or just believing in Christ?
 'Cause we can believe, and not change a thing
 But following will change our whole life
 He never said, come, acknowledge my existence
 Or believe in me, I'm your first-class ticket to eternity...
 But 87 times he said... Follow me...

The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

The Psalm - Psalm 62:6-14

6 For God alone my soul in silence waits; *
truly, my hope is in him.

7 He alone is my rock and my salvation, *
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.

8 In God is my safety and my honor; *
God is my strong rock and my refuge.

9 Put your trust in him always, O people, *
pour out your hearts before him, for God is our
refuge.

10 Those of high degree are but a fleeting
breath, *
even those of low estate cannot be trusted.

11 On the scales they are lighter than a breath,
*
all of them together.

12 Put no trust in extortion;
in robbery take no empty pride; *
though wealth increase, set not your heart upon
it.

13 God has spoken once, twice have I heard it,
*
that power belongs to God.

14 Steadfast love is yours, O Lord, *
for you repay everyone according to his deeds.

The Epistle - I Corinthians 7:29-31

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions,

and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

The Gospel - Mark 1:14-20

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Alternate Gospel: The Gospel - Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Other Voices;

From Working Preacher, for June 11, 2023:

- There is no preparation in the text that proceeds Matthew's calling. No seminary degree. God does not necessarily call the fully equipped. God equips the called.

- So, it may be with the church's ministry: sometimes we go forth and identify ourselves with those on the margins; in other cases, the needs of others draw the church beyond its comfortable boundaries. Like the Jesus of the First Gospel, the church needs to cultivate the art of following.
- Jesus says the healthy do not need a physician while the sick do, that he has come to call not the righteous but sinners (9:13). Yet Jesus' companionship with sinners appears to be just that, companionship and not treatment. Jesus has many harsh words to say in the First Gospel, but he directs none of them at sinners. His inaugural message is a call to repent (4:17), and he denounces the cities he has visited for failing to repent (11:20-21; 12:41). He pronounces woe against the scribes and the Pharisees (chapter 23). But in the First Gospel Jesus not once reproves sinners. He does not criticize them. He does not demand their repentance. He simply eats and drinks with them. (This is true of the entire Gospel tradition, except for the story of the Adulterous Woman, which was inserted into John's Gospel long after its composition.)
- To be truly righteous is to reflect the face of God; and to find righteousness within ourselves we have to **look inward** and then **seek God in an outward way**.

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

5 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,^[a] the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy

12 While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy.^[b] When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

14 Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

15 Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. 18 Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19 When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

21 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ²⁴But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

Jesus Calls Levi and Eats With Sinners

27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³²I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

From "Tax Collectors and Sinners (Luke 5:27)," by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson³

Tax collectors (KJV "publicans") probably weren't numbered among the poor. Their profession, if it could be called that, made many of them wealthy.

Rome's method of collecting taxes was to employ as tax collectors locals who knew who had money and where they kept it. A province was divided into tax districts. Locals would bid for the contract of collecting taxes in a district. The bid was the money they were contracted to pay the government; whatever they collected over that amount was theirs to keep. The chief tax collector (such as Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2) owned the contract for his region. Then he would employ others to collect taxes in the various villages. Tax collectors were widely regarded as thieves and robbers. Perhaps the Jews told "tax collector jokes" the same way we tell "lawyer jokes," we don't know.

Rome collected three principal kinds of taxes, (1) a land tax, (2) a head tax, and (3) a customs tax of 2% to 5% of value on goods being transported. A tax office or booth would be located near a city gate or port to collect the custom tax, though liability for this tax would have been primarily limited to those engaging in commercial trade to other areas¹²³ -- such as fishermen exporting dried fish or farmers shipping surplus crops to a larger city. If ancient Capernaum is to be identified with the ruins at Tell Hum (as I believe it should be), then the customs house would have collected revenue on the produce of the area, as well as traffic that moved eastward along the road to Bethsaida Julias.¹²⁴

Tax collectors were hated men. When I lived in Southern California, I had a next-door neighbor who was pretty vague about what he did for a living. "I work for the federal government," he told me at first. It turns out that he worked for the Internal Revenue Service, but was afraid to let it be known lest he be ostracized by us and other neighbors. Back then, the IRS wasn't as domesticated as it is supposed to have become. Back then, the IRS could seize your records and money first and ask questions later. Back then, the taxpayer was guilty until he could prove himself innocent. The IRS was nasty. No wonder my neighbor was vague.

But if the IRS can be distrusted in the US, think what it was like in Jesus' day. All a tax collector would have to do is threaten to report a person to the soldiers of Herod or Rome, and he could take what he

³ See; <https://www.jesuwalk.com/luke/013-levi.htm> Copyright © 2023, Ralph F. Wilson. <pastor@joyfulheart.com> All rights reserved.

wanted by extortion. This was a police state, and residents didn't have many civil rights unless they were citizens of Rome. Few were.

Rome itself was hated. Its troops occupied the sacred land, with a garrison even quartered at the northwest corner of the holy Temple precincts in the Fortress of Antonia. Roman justice may be honored by wistful classicists twenty centuries later, but close up, the Romans were the oppressors, the takers, the enforcers. They were hated.

Tax collectors who collaborated with the hated Romans were despised even more. They were viewed as traitors, turncoats, quislings. They worked for the enemy out of greed, a greed that sucked the people dry. Jesus' words about those who reject church discipline suggest the way tax collectors were regarded:

"If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17).

Tax collectors, wealthy as they might be, were shunned.

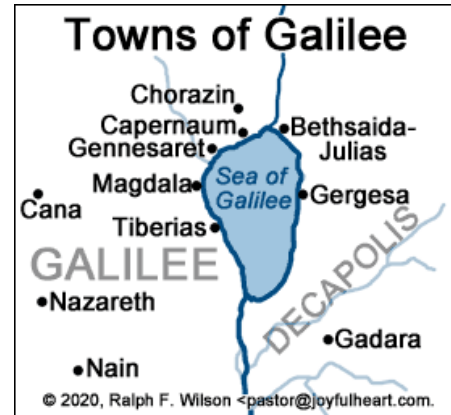
To eat with a Gentile or tax collector was considered by the strict Pharisees to render one spiritually or ceremonially unclean. Uncleanness was conveyed by touch and association. Even a house entered by a tax collector was considered unclean.¹²⁵ Tax collectors were both hated and avoided by respectable society.

So these *nouveaux riches* were considered beneath contempt -- but they did have friends. Other "sinners" might include Gentiles who lived in the community. They wouldn't be welcome in strict Jewish homes, but the tax collectors, already rejects themselves, readily accepted them. The term "sinner" was also used to designate individuals who didn't keep rules of purity as strictly as what was considered the standard. The Pharisees probably looked at a great portion of Jewish society as "sinners," since they didn't share Pharisee requirements of keeping every aspect of the oral tradition surrounding the Law. Apostate Jews or excommunicated members of a synagogue would be considered "sinners," as well as those who sinned willfully and heinously and did not repent. The Pharisee's prayer at the Temple put tax collectors alongside robbers, evildoers, and adulterers (Luke 18:9-12). Tax collectors were willing to associate with people that respectable Jews would have nothing to do with.¹²⁶

Levi and Matthew (Luke 5:27)

The particular tax collector in our passage probably isn't the chief tax collector in his district, for he apparently spends his days in a tax office near the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum (see Mark 2:13-17), alongside the main road. The word translated "tax booth" (NIV), "tax office" (RSV), or "receipt of custom" (KJV) is Greek *telōnion*, "revenue or tax office."¹²⁷ Levi is waiting to collect a toll on any goods transported past him as they enter the region ruled by Herod Antipas.

The tax collector's name is given in Mark and Luke as Levi, making it likely that he is a descendent of the tribe of Levi, from whom the priests and Levites descended. Back in the days of telephone books, in New York City you could find thousands of families by the surname of "Levi" or "Levine." Instead of a holy ministry of serving in the temple, this Levi is instead engaged in a most unholy trade -- at least as it was practiced in Palestine. Mark 2:14 also identifies him as the son of Alphaeus.



Location of Capernaum ([larger map](#))

But the name he is best known by is "Matthew" (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in the list of the Twelve Disciples (Luke 6:14-16). Matthew's gospel in that list specifies him as "Matthew the tax collector," lest there be any confusion (Matthew 10:3). The authorship of the Gospel of Matthew is attributed to him by many scholars, both ancient and modern.¹²⁸ And it was not uncommon to have two names, or a name and a nickname. Peter is called Simon son of Jonah, Simon Peter, and Cephas (the Aramaic form of Peter). Saul and Paul both refer to the Apostle from Tarsus, Saul his Jewish name, and Paul (Paulus) the name he uses as a Roman citizen and traveler.

Leaving Everything and Following (Luke 5:27-28)

Jesus has been teaching again along the lakeshore at Capernaum (Mark 2:13). When he is finished, he walks over to the small tax office or customs house alongside the highway. Sitting inside is a despised man, Matthew Levi by name, whom Jesus has seen several times in the crowds as he has been teaching. Jesus looks at him, and says simply: "Follow me." The word in Greek is, *akoloutheō*, which means, literally, "come after" from *a*, copulative, and *keleuthos*, "road," properly, "walking the same road."¹²⁹ Then it means "accompany, go along with." But it also has a specific meaning, "to follow someone as a disciple."¹³⁰ It goes along in the tradition of the rabbinical master-pupil relationship.¹³¹ Jesus' invitation is a two-word command: "Follow me."

Think what Levi feels like when he hears those two words tap-tapping like a door-knocker on his soul. He is being called to leave his lucrative trade as a tax collector to become almost a beggar, sustaining himself on the sometimes-meager contributions made to his Rabbi or Master. In an instant, he is being called from wealth to poverty.

But I don't think the issue of poverty really enters into his decision. Only one thing matters, and it matters very deeply -- oh, so deeply -- to Levi. That Jesus has sought him out and selected him on purpose.

That Jesus would even engage him in conversation is a marvel. He is despised. He is hated. He has been ostracized from respectable society. And Jesus cares enough about him to stop by when not required by law to do so. Jesus accepts him. Jesus loves him -- the most unloved man in Capernaum. And Jesus calls him personally: "Follow me." Since he was a boy, he hadn't imagined himself a righteous man. Now he is being called to accompany a holy man on his itinerant travels. How bizarre! How wonderful!

I don't think that the money has any allure for him in the face of this simple request: "Follow me." That he is wanted, needed, by his Prophet, this Miracle Worker, this incredible Teacher. It is enough for him. Luke records,

"Levi got up, left everything, and followed him." (Luke 5:28)

Oh, I'm sure he turns in to the chief tax collector the money he had collected and submits his formal resignation -- he is responsible enough to do that, surely. But when he stands up, the decision has been made, the die is cast, and he leaves his tax collection trade never to turn back. Instead, he follows Jesus. The word "followed" is *akolouthēō*, but now it is in the Imperfect Tense, which suggests beginning an action and continuing it thereafter, such as "he began to follow."

Jesus Dines at Levi's Banquet (Luke 5:29)

He replies to Jesus' invitation by issuing his own invitation to his new Master. "Jesus, I would be very honored if you would be a guest in my home this very night." Jesus accepts.

And so Levi scurries off to make preparations for a great feast, Greek *dochē*, "reception, banquet."¹³² This is no intimate dinner party for a few guests. Luke describes it with the word *megas*, "great." To his large house, suited to a wealthy man, Levi invites "a large crowd of tax collectors and others."

Now if you and I were there, we might have sat stiffly in the presence of these jovial social outcasts. We wouldn't be comfortable in the least! These are out and out thieves, unbelievers, open sinners, social pariahs. No, we wouldn't be comfortable at all. We would wait until a reasonable hour, make our excuses, and leave with a sigh of relief.

But Jesus is comfortable. I can see him enjoying the occasion, getting acquainted with people who have been afraid to approach him before, now enchanted in his presence. He is eating heartily of Levi's sumptuous food, drinking of Levi's excellent wines, and thoroughly enjoying himself. His joy before them lights up this party of outcasts into an occasion that they will remember to their dying day. The afternoon when Jesus the Messiah ate dinner at the same table, shook their hand, put his arm on their shoulder, and embraced them in warmth and friendship. They will never forget, nor will Levi.

Levi has introduced his closest friends to his newest Friend, and is now ready to follow. The growing band of disciples -- Peter and Andrew, James and John -- who have despised him for collecting a toll on their fish exports, may have been stand-offish at first. But when they see Jesus warmly accept him, they accept him, too, into this strange new fellowship of disciples called from all walks of life to walk with Jesus and

learn his ways. It is giddy and glorious, and deeply moving to Levi, as he cleans up after the party. He is no longer Levi the tax collector. He is Matthew the Disciple, and it feels very good. Very good indeed.

Pharisees and Scribes Put Jesus Down (Luke 5:30)

But Levi's joy is mixed. Because he is the occasion for drawing more criticism to Jesus from the Pharisees and their scribes -- the teachers of the law that hold to their particular interpretation of the oral law. It must hurt to hear his new fellow disciples put down with the question,

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners?'" (Luke 5:30)

Doctor for the Sin Sick Soul (Luke 5:31-32)

Jesus, who is no doubt intended to hear this loudly-spoken put-down, chooses to respond, instead of to let it pass. He turns to the scribes and Pharisees with a comment of his own:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:31-32).

No matter what might be recommended by the American Medical Association, many people never go to the doctor for an annual check-up. Instead, they go when they're sick, when they sense a problem, a growth, a weakness, an ache, an injury. There are few appointments made on a schedule -- with the exception of well-baby visits in the first few months of life. Appointments are made because the patients have something wrong.

And so Jesus answers the Pharisees' criticism, "Doctors aren't for the healthy, but for the sick." And then he continues, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." If all were righteous, spiritually healthy, Jesus would have no necessity to pay a house call. But because we are not so righteous after all, because our souls are troubled and besmirched by compromise -- because of all this we desperately need Jesus to come and call us to something better than the filth we may be living in. We need him to call us to our best.

How long has it been since you've made an appointment to see Jesus? To talk to him about the things that are weighing you down? To risk him identifying the sins that you are all too aware of? Sometimes we resist going to the doctor because we're afraid he'll confirm what we already know. And so in our fear we try to avoid what we know is true. How about you? Isn't it about time to make an appointment with the Doctor?

I love the wonderful African-American slave song with this theme:

*There is a balm in Gilead / To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead / To heal the sin sick soul.*