

### **“What Matters?”**

About ten years ago, I was serving as council President of my congregation. We called a new pastor and it was the day of her installation. This was a time of celebration for the congregation. We had been without a full-time pastor for nearly two years. The new pastor was a woman and a recent seminary graduate. The congregation was delighted to begin a new ministry. I was setting the table for communion and readying the chancel area for the service. The new pastor was in the fellowship hall making her last minute preparations. As I was completing my tasks, the preacher for the service, someone I did not know came up to me and said, “Did you ever think about going to Seminary?” I must have had a look of “what, me?” because she repeated it adding, “You have a very real presence with what you are doing here.” I responded with “I have thought about it a few times over the years. I enjoy my job and besides that I’m getting too old to go into ministry. It would take me a long time to complete the studies.” I kept giving excuses and finally she said, “It’s never too late.” The installation service ended and I thought I would never see this person again. Little did I know at the time this person would reappear two years later! I had dodged the call to ministry one more time. Something I was trying to avoid since a teenager.

Like Matthew in our gospel lesson today whom Jesus went right up to and said, “Follow me” someone I did not know came to me and said ‘come to share Jesus.’ Did Jesus know this man? Surely Matthew knew who Jesus was. Why would Jesus want me he must have thought? I am a tax collector with a reputation of being unfair; of being dishonest to my fellow citizens. Why would Jesus want to associate with me; a person regarded as a social and moral outcast of society? Why would this preacher who didn’t know me think I should go to seminary to train for public ministry?

What happens next in our text is even more astonishing. Matthew, Jesus and his disciples have dinner together. Matthew throws a feast and invites his buddies who were probably like him to join them for dinner. Matthew was excited to have his friends experience this Jesus. Matthew by this time had committed to follow Jesus and now wanted to share his new found life. What better opportunity then to share over food and fellowship together. Something we Lutherans have mastered over the years!

Outside on the street, the Pharisees watched. They could not believe that Jesus would associate with such lowly persons. The Pharisees, the keepers of the written law of the faith, were strict traditionalists you might say. The ones with the clipboard in hand checking to make sure everything was done according to the proper specifications. They asked the disciples, who were milling around inside and outside why Jesus eats with sinners. There is no way the Pharisees would associate with ‘those’ people. They would not be caught associating with the outcasts of society.

The disciples encouraged the Pharisees to go inside, learn what this means “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. What really matters – that Matthew and his friends were not following the traditions of the law of faith, not offering sacrifices to God; or that Jesus invited sinners, the social outcasts to join him, a sign of mercy?

Jesus welcomed Matthew without asking questions; without trying to clarify specifics of his life. Deep inside, Jesus saw in Matthew a loving, caring, compassionate person. Jesus overlooked the seemingly negative aspects of his life. Matthew was respected as a person, a person of God. Jesus extended a merciful hand to join him.

Jesus saw Matthew not for who he was but rather for who he could become. A disciple of Jesus. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? A disciple is a person who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another. In this case, the teachings of Jesus Christ. Look at the group of interesting persons Jesus gathered to be his disciples. A tax collector, fishermen, a physician, common ordinary people. Much like you and I. Jesus did not call the 'perfect people' or the righteous to be his disciples. He called the sinner, those who had reputations in society. Jesus desired people for whom he could show mercy. People who could be forgiven. People who would be comforted in their pain. You and I are exactly who God calls to be disciples. You have so much to offer, you who have strayed, you who show mercy to others; you are called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We live in a broken world, surrounded by people who are socially outcast. People live in conditions of poverty; people are ridiculed because of racism, sexism or any other –ism we name; people need food, clothing, and companionship. News broadcasts daily tell of the plight of persons caught in the crossfire of violence. Maybe you know some persons who are struggling to live, to understand why this or that has happened to them. We label people not like ourselves; putting them aside in our minds forgetting that they too are children of God.

As people of God, we are challenged to show mercy and compassion to others. Sometimes, we are like the Pharisees asking why. Why don't you do this or do that? Why don't you follow the traditions? It is easy to point fingers and tell someone else how to live or act with no regard for the person. A favorite line in most church meetings is 'We've never done it that way before.' I've not heard that here at St. Peters...yet. Traditions do have meaning in our lives. They enrich our heritage and understanding of what goes on in life. Without traditions, there is nothing to grow from. Meaning for life comes from traditions evolved by the influence of others. Traditions challenge us to look at ourselves and ask, 'what matters'. Maybe you heard a variation about the burned out light bulb in the church. It was the light in the middle of the nave. The sexton was on the ladder changing the bulb when someone came in and asked, "What are you doing up there?" "I'm changing the light bulb. It has been burned out now for about a year. It's difficult to see from that pew." "Oh, exclaimed the person standing on the floor. Do you have to do that; I gave that light bulb to the church twenty-five years ago!"

What really matters in life? It is easy to get caught up in the 'stuff' of life. The daily chores, the feeling that I need to do this or do that to receive a reward. I need to do this task then I will gain the respect of others. I need to do good deeds that feel good. What really matters is the relationship you build with God. God loves you the way you are in all of your brokenness.

Look at Abraham. God told him, have I got a plan for you. You will be the father of a great nation with numerous descendants. Wait, I am so old, God. What are you expecting of me? Abraham soon realized God would take care of everything. His faith in God would sustain him no matter what happened. Abraham's faith grew as he gave glory to God, convinced God was able to do what God promised. The stuff of Abraham's life did not matter.

What REALLY matters is the relationship we have with Jesus. Like Matthew, Jesus comes to each of us and says 'Follow me'. I will give you life. A life filled with grace and mercy. More than you can ever comprehend. That is what matters; a merciful God who shows compassion and love for each other.

As I explored this church building this past week, I discovered signs of God's love and mercy. The stained glass windows in this nave each tell a story. The panels to your back tell the life of Jesus. The panels above the choir loft tell what Jesus desires of us to do for the hungry – feed them; the thirsty – give them drink; the stranger – welcome them in; the naked – give them clothing and the sick – visit them. The window behind shows Jesus surrounded by people; people of all ages gathered to hear the words of love.

The stained glass windows tell a story, but the greatest story is the one you tell. It is your story of faith that makes St. Peter's congregation what it is. The people you meet daily, whether at work or play, in the office or on the golf course, at home or at school. You tell the story of Jesus no matter where you are in life, God claims you and calls you to make known the saving power of Jesus Christ to others. To others society sets aside as undesirable

St. Peter's statement of welcome is a wonderful example of showing God's mercy. We, the congregation of St. Peter's, affirm that all people share the worth that comes from being unique individuals created by God. All people; no qualifications placed on individuals. Each of us is uniquely created for discipleship in this world.

As you leave this place and go into the world, like the plaque by the front door says, "That those who through these doors enter God's house might find richness of life." Richness of life. A life rich in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This gathered assembly, called to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others. Go out and do likewise. Thanks be to God!