

“All in a Day’s Work” (Matthew 9:9)

Pentecost 4, June 8, 2008

Picture the scene in our text. Matthew is sitting at his tax booth. As folks stop by, he calculates what they owe, adds a little surcharge for himself, then sends them on their way. A few grumble under their breath. So what? It’s not like they’re going to get out of paying their taxes...or his surcharge. So he takes it in stride: *All in a day’s work!* But now, as he goes about his day’s work, who should show up but Jesus? Jesus Himself! He tells Matthew, “**Follow me.**” And Matthew does just that. Immediately, Matthew gets up and follows Him.

That’s it. That’s all Matthew tells us about his call to be a disciple – which is kind of surprising, considering how his life changed. These days some would go on and on about such an experience – how sad and empty they felt beforehand; how exciting it was when Jesus came into their lives; all the chills and thrills of that glorious moment when they decided to follow Jesus! Matthew doesn’t tell us any of that. We don’t know what he felt. All we know is that Jesus said, “**Follow Me,**” and Matthew “**got up and followed Him.**”

But really, what more do we need to know? To apply this text to ourselves, should it matter what was going on inside Matthew? That could just sidetrack us into wondering: *If I were in the same situation, would I have done the same thing?* Which, of course, is irrelevant, isn’t it? We’re not in the same situation. We never have been, never will be. What’s more, we’ve already committed to following Jesus. The “big decision” is a done deal. So why think further about that? I suspect Matthew said so little about the moment of his call because something else mattered infinitely more: *continuing to follow Jesus.*

He filled up 28 chapters writing about what that involved. The other New Testament writers followed suit. Not even St. Paul wrote much about his call – certainly not compared to what he wrote about following Jesus. And how do you explain that? Could it be that the first step wasn’t *that* important to them? Could it be that the beginning was...well, just the beginning? Could it be that what mattered more was hearing Jesus’ call here and now, and responding to Jesus’ call here and now – living as a disciple here and now...all in a day’s work?

Could be! But what a contrast to many people today! They put so much emphasis on the conversion experience, making a decision for Jesus, and of course, whether we’ve been born again. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked that question. Probably you have been asked it, too. And some folks can really grill us on it. *Are you sure you’ve been born again? When exactly did it happen? What exactly did you feel?*

Sound familiar? Now, if we’re baptized believers, all that’s easy enough to answer. *Yes, I’ve been born again, just the way Jesus talked about it in John chapter 3 – “**by water and the Spirit**” – which, if you don’t torture the text, can only mean one thing: I was “born again” when I was baptized.*

But that said, why this preoccupation with spiritual birth? Would any of us grill someone on their physical birth? *Were you born? Are you sure? When exactly did it happen? What was it like?* Faced with that, I'd want to say, *Give me a break. It happened, okay? Next topic please!* Like: *Now that we're born, what are we doing with our lives?* That's a bit more relevant, isn't it? And why should it be any different in our spiritual life? We need to focus on what's relevant! Not just the beginning of our spiritual life, but what we're doing with it here and now. Not just the first step of discipleship but the on-going journey. *Now that I'm following Jesus, what does following Him actually involve?*

I'll bet that's what Matthew was asking himself even as he left his tax booth. *Now that I'm following Jesus, what does following Him actually involve?* You see, up until then he'd had a pretty clear picture of life. He could expect to do this and this and this and this – all in a day's work. But now he was venturing into unknown territory. He couldn't expect to do this and this anymore, even if society was fine with it – not if he was following Jesus! He couldn't even go on thinking "this and this" anymore – however much others did – not if he was following Jesus! Old values had to give way to new ones. Old habits had to be replaced. Priorities, pastimes, lifestyle, ethics – even his motivations needed to change now that he was following Jesus! And clearly, this change wouldn't happen just like that! Conversion wouldn't happen just like that! Far from being a *one-time* decision, it would take lots of decisions to follow Jesus – often decisions every bit as hard as leaving the tax booth behind. In short, conversion would have to be an on-going process – of leaving the old ways behind him, integrating Christian ways into ordinary life, letting Jesus shape and change him to the very depths of his being, until *following Jesus* would be "all in a day's work."

The same is true for us! It does not matter whether we've had a dramatic conversion. It does not matter whether we've had a mountaintop experience. It does not matter whether we can pinpoint when exactly we decided to follow Jesus. What matters is following Jesus here and now. What matters is on-going conversion. What matters is that more and more we leave the old ways behind, we integrate Christian ways into ordinary life, we let Jesus shape and change us to the very depths of our being. What matters is that more and more we see *following Jesus* as "all in a day's work."

Now, some might think: *But that was easier for Matthew. He literally got to follow Jesus, so of course that was all in a day's work for him. Our situation is different.* And yes it is. But again, that's irrelevant. Through the years, plenty of Christians have come to see following Jesus as "all in a day's work." Plenty of Christians have reaped the benefits, too. And how? Well, remember what following Jesus involves. None of it requires Him to be physically present. It's enough that He is spiritually present – and that His voice still speaks to us through His Word.

I mean, for starters, following Jesus means **spending time with Him**, doesn't it? Talking to Him. Listening to Him. Enjoying His presence. **Spending time with Jesus**. Matthew did that literally, but we can do it, too. For when we talk to Him in prayer, isn't that spending time with Jesus? When we listen to His voice in Scripture,

isn't that spending time with Jesus? When we take Communion or just tune into his presence here with us, isn't that spending time with Jesus? Sure it is! And all the things Matthew got from his time with Jesus, we can get, too. We can hear His clear call: "**Follow Me.**" We can also hear His instructions as to what that call means right here, right now. It's all in the Word, and the more time we spend in the Word, the clearer it becomes. That is, the more we mull over the Word, pray it through, apply it to our lives, the clearer it becomes. So prayer and Bible study can't be sporadic. Devotions can't just be now and then. If we're serious about following Jesus, then spending time with Him needs to be a regular part of our routine -- all in a day's work.

That's for starters. But of course, hearing His call and knowing what it means isn't all there is to following Jesus. There's also trusting Jesus enough to respond. And here, too, we're in the same boat as Matthew. Jesus doesn't have to be physically present for us to trust in Him. He doesn't have to be physically present for us to respond to His call. Yes, it might seem easier if we had the advantage of looking Jesus square in the eye, but on the other hand, Matthew didn't have the advantage of knowing Jesus' track record -- knowing His trustworthiness and His power. At least, not fully; not at first. And frankly, I think that gives us a huge advantage: knowing that the One who calls us to do this, that, or the other, is the One willing to die for us, the One able to rise again. Knowing that kind of puts things in perspective -- especially all our little "what-ifs."

For when it comes to trusting Jesus -- trusting Him enough to respond -- isn't that what often gets in the way? The "*what-ifs*"? Or perhaps I should call them the "*but ifs*." Like: *I know I should turn the other cheek, but if I do, won't that make me look weak? I know I should forgive as I've been forgiven, but if I do, won't people take advantage of me? I know I should tithe, but if I do, can I be sure I'll have enough to get by? And I know I should share my faith, but if I do, might people look down on me?* The list could go on and on. But-if. But-if. And what all the "but ifs" have in common is fear of consequences. Or put another way, what they all have in common is lack of trust in Jesus. Trust that He knows what He's saying. Trust that He has our best interests at heart. Trust that He will be faithful to us. Trust that His grace will be sufficient for us. Trust that his power will be made perfect in weakness. Our "but-ifs" may seem compelling, logical, but bottom line they show lack of trust. And there's no following Jesus without trusting Him -- trusting Him enough to respond all in a day's work.

I will never forget a conversation I had with a young man just out of high school. The subject was purity. He was sleeping with his girl friend even though he knew it was wrong. And his explanation? Not "We're so much in love" or "Times are different now." It was even lamer. "I know it's supposed to be wrong, but if we didn't sleep together, my friends would think I was weird." I told him I'd risk it. A few other things, too. He just gave me that look that said: *Pastor, you just don't understand. Oh, what a tragedy it would be if people considered me weird! Right up there with getting burned at the stake!* But like many Christians, he thought that following Jesus should be easy. There should be no complications, no conflicts with the way the rest of the

world lives. As long as we're saved, isn't that what matters? Besides, nobody's perfect. And we have a right to be happy, don't we? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The interesting thing in his case is that some years later he met the right woman and got married. And at that point, he did honestly admit he wished he had done things differently. You know what else? He's got teenaged daughters now. And you better believe the excuse "what if people think I'm weird" doesn't fly at his house! Looking back, he now realizes the Lord knew what He was talking about! Looking back, he knows the Lord did have his best interests at heart! Looking back, how much better it would have been to trust Jesus instead of giving into his fears; trust Jesus enough to respond! Now he's trying to do that -- as Matthew did, as we all should. Trusting Jesus in big things as well as little things; trusting Jesus as a habit, a way of life. Trusting Jesus whatever the situation -- all in a day's work.

Now, such trust usually requires **depending on Jesus**, too; depending on Jesus for the strength to follow. For it does take extra strength. Did then. Does now. Matthew knew that full well. You know, his Gospel contains Jesus' most challenging teachings. Just take the Sermon on the Mount or the part about forgiving 70 x 7 times. But his Gospel also contains Jesus' wonderful invitation: "**Come unto Me, all who labor and are heavy laden...**" That's no coincidence. Matthew knew that if he was going to trust Jesus no matter what, he wasn't going to manage that on his own. He needed power beyond his own, and Jesus offered him power beyond his own. So he learned to manage by depending on Jesus as a habit, a way of life, whatever the situation -- all in a day's work.

That is the wisest course. We only get in trouble trying to handle things ourselves. That's why trust weakens. That's why we stumble. That's why we prove unproductive. By just depending on ourselves. And this shouldn't surprise us. In another Gospel, Jesus tells us clearly that if we depend on Him we will bear much fruit, but apart from Him we can do nothing. Folks, Jesus will not ask us to do anything He won't help us do. Especially when it comes to the change in our thoughts, our emotions, our spiritual core -- our on-going conversion. The power has to come from Jesus. And how do we tap into that power? By drawing upon Jesus daily, especially through prayer. That's *also* part of following Him. Sure, the Lord can give us a power surge when we especially need it, but the best way to be sure the power's there is by depending on Jesus as a habit, as a way of life, whatever the situation -- all in a day's work.

So to sum up... It's been said that following Jesus is basically following *through*. That's the point we want to take home today. Regardless of when we *began* to follow Jesus, however great that first step might have felt, it's all history now. What really matters is *continuing to follow Jesus*. This we can do the same way Matthew did -- by spending time with Jesus, by trusting Him enough to respond, and by depending on Him for strength. Yes, that's what really matters: *continuing to follow Jesus* -- not just sporadically, but as a habit, a way of life, whatever the situation, all in a day's work. Amen.

