

# Follow Me

## *Matthew 9:9-13*

Some years ago, Garth Brooks was one of the hottest country singers around, selling more records and grossing more in concert ticket sales than practically any other artist. In 1991, his song, titled *"Friends in Low Places"* received the Country Music Association award as the nations number-one single. We laughed at it in my household when we first heard it, not knowing it would be the top hit of the year. I heard it recently on a classic country station.

Remember how it goes:

I've got friends in low places,  
Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases  
All my blues away; and I'll be okay.  
I'm not big on social graces  
Think I'll slip on down to the oasis  
Oh I've got friends in low places

I often wondered what Jesus would have thought of that song, *"I've Got Friends in Low Places."* But I think today's Gospel lesson provides a pretty good clue to the answer of that question. Jesus had friends in some pretty low places, including, of course Matthew, one of his Twelve Apostles, the one for whom the first Gospel is named.

Matthew was a tax collector. No matter what you may think of tax collectors today, in Jesus' time there was no relationship to what we know today. Tax collection was considered the lowest form of commerce. There were a number of reasons for this. One is that the tax collector worked more or less on commission. He was required to turn over a certain sum to the government and the rest was profit. But even worse was the fact that tax collectors worked for the hated Romans who had conquered Israel. They worked for the occupying force and thus were considered traitors to their own people. I don't think you can get much lower than that.

Jesus said to Matthew *"Follow me."* And he did. *"Follow me"* without any explanation and no incentives such as follow me and I'll do this for you; or follow me and we'll go here or there. This what is considered a blind call, a two-word command without any promise: Follow me.

What makes people follow these days, anyway? What makes them follow politicians, athletes, rock stars, or even religious leaders? What is it that makes people turn their allegiance, time and money to one particular cause? Could it be the personal magnetism of the ones they are following, or the sheer emotional lift they get from being in contact with that person or group? I have lived in several cities and I can understand people following professional sports teams, especially when they are winning. But what makes people want to follow Christ, especially in a

time when there are so many other more immediately gratifying goals to pursue or people to follow?

Thus, we are struck immediately by Matthew's impetuosity in this story, especially his quick response. But perhaps it wasn't that way at all. Perhaps Jesus, with his mesmerizing smile stopped by and Matthew was simply swept off his feet. I don't think so. It doesn't sound like Matthew. Perhaps he made it big financially, got to the top of his profession but was still unhappy. Or maybe he was thinking about a career change. Maybe he was reevaluating his life. He hadn't accomplished all he thought he would and life was slipping by. Maybe it was a classic mid-life crisis. Maybe he went to the synagogue searching for something more fulfilling than the fastest car or the newest fashion. Maybe he finally figured out he couldn't buy happiness. Matthews sit in the pews of every church every week, searching for something deeper and more profound than they can find in their daily stock reports. And Christ will come by-as he does for all of us, sooner or later-through a line in a hymn, a phrase in a prayer, an endearing glance from a little child or a kind word spoken before or after worship.

Then again, maybe it was Jesus' openness and friendliness to one of society's most despised people. Tax gatherers in Jesus' day were on a par with panderers, adulterers, liars and cheats ... The pressure to be constantly in the black financially forced Matthew so far into the gray that, like so many who were once well-intentioned, Matthew had long forgotten the difference between right and wrong. He had lost his moral compass and was adrift. And here in a world where everyone despised him for what he did, where he was perhaps sick of his own deep sin, suddenly there was this young man who seemed so calm and so wise for a man his age, one who looked him in the eyes and accepted him as a child of God even as Christ looks into your eyes and mine and says, "You're one of mine. Come along with me. Now!"

Some believe, and some commentators have speculated, that Matthew had heard Jesus before. That he had thought about his life and how he needed a change. That he had weighed the pros and cons of following this street preacher. But the text doesn't say that. It only says that he got up, and followed. The people around Matthew must have been asking, "What's gotten into Matthew? Does he know something we don't know?"

Jesus says to Matthew and to each of us, "*Follow Me.*" There are no explanations of where Jesus and Matthew would end up. Not much is given about the elements of Matthew's life with and for Christ. We have his Gospel which tells us some of the things he witnesses in Christ's company. Like Matthew, our lives with Christ will be adventures. He gets to see miracles. He experiences the power of Christ's transforming presence himself as he is transformed from an exploitative and despised tax collector.

This story is given to us in part, I believe, to show how low Jesus goes to meet someone. He reaches to the down-and-outs, and here, with Matthew and maybe with us, up to the up-and-outs. Matthew does not shy from using the word "sinner" in allusion to himself. He knows himself to be a redeemed son of God because Jesus invites him (as He still invites us) to, "*Follow Me!*" and Matthew follows.

He follows Christ in important ways: He follows in the path of service; He follows (according to legend) to the point of martyrdom; He follows as a disciple, an apprentice servant; He follows as a witness sharing in his Gospel what he had seen and heard as he accompanies Christ; he follows in service after the example of Jesus Himself.

It's hard to tell why people do it. Some do find it difficult. Some of our Biblical heroes had a hard time. Like Sarah, who laughed at God when the angels said she was going to have a baby in the geriatric ward and Medicare was going to pick up the tab; like Jonah, who took a boat ride to avoid preaching to Nineveh; or Jacob, tried to pin the angel of the Lord in a wrestling match and ended up limping; or Jeremiah, who tried to duck behind the "I'm too young, Lord" excuse; or Mary, who said, "How can this be?" Some of us have the sense that we have been picked out long ago, and we can't do anything about it. But resistance only nudges us more quickly into the chancel or the church committee.

*"Follow me"* means *be my disciple*. It means responding to God's call whether we like it or not. But it means much more. *"Follow me"* tells us more about Jesus than it does about us. He is the one to be followed. He is the one to be confessed. He is the one to be obeyed.

*"Follow me"* means more than walking "in his steps" in the sweet by and by. It means participation in the salvation offered in Jesus Christ, and participation in his suffering. Something about taking up our crosses and—well, you know the rest. Of course, we already know about suffering, don't we? We thought following Christ meant no more suffering. Boy, were we surprised! We listened to the TV preachers who told us if you just love Jesus enough, everything would be wonderful. Boy, were they wrong. We suffer in quiet ways that some people will never know. When death robs us of a father or mother, and it does and it will; when you lose that job you had counted on; when our spouses or friends die and leave us alone, and they do and they will, we realize that suffering and discipleship go hand in hand.

But, there's something we should know that those who have gone before us knew. If we understand what *"Follow me"* really means, we know that we never suffer alone, that Christ has suffered with us on the cross, and is with us even now. The cross never erases our pain; it simply shows us that we are not alone. It puts flesh on the words, "Immanuel, God with us." With the resurrection, it means that death is never the final sentence in God's sermon to us.

Now do you suppose that Matthew understood all that? Do you suppose that's the reason he followed? Maybe he saw it in Jesus' face, in Jesus' eyes. But the gospel writer doesn't give us that kind of detail, only his words, *"Follow me."* With these two simple words, Jesus disarms us, neither convicting nor extolling, but calling each to an action that is only possible because of his help.

James Michener, who was never known for brevity in his books, spoke at the National Press Club in Washington once, and when asked how he got his ideas for his books and how he proceeded to write them, he said, "Well, I usually have about nine ideas rattling around in my head at one time—nine or ten good ideas, Hawaii, Chesapeake, all different kinds of ideas, and I whittle them

down and whittle them down and whittle them down until I have one idea, and you take that one good idea," said Michener, "and devote the next three or four years of your life to it. There's no turning back, once you're in." And Michener concluded, "Now that's a lot of dedication." I guess so.

Well, how about one idea for a lifetime? And Jesus said, "*Follow me.*"

Now if I were in some other church, among someone other than staid Presbyterians, this might be the point in the sermon where I would invite you to come forward and rededicate your lives to Jesus. I might do what is referred to as an "altar call." I might say no matter where you have been in your life, now is the time to recommit your life to Jesus, to follow the One who loves you no matter what. I might invite you to make a fresh start and hear anew the words of Jesus, "*Follow me.*"

But good Presbyterian pastor that I am, I won't take you too far out of your comfort zone. Not today. But I encourage you to make that altar call – if not literally, then figuratively - in your hearts and hear the words that Jesus said to Matthew the tax collector, and Peter the fisherman and Simon the Zealot and all the countless others along the way: "*Follow me.*" You might be amazed where the journey will lead.

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