

In every small town there's a story that everybody knows. A story that gets whispered on front porches and repeated at the diner over coffee. A story about a boy from their town who had it all laid out for him. His father was a respected leader, a man who served on every board and was trusted by the whole community. Everyone just knew his son would take over the family business someday, keep the good name, and become a pillar of the community himself.

But it didn't happen. The boy fell in with the wrong crowd. He squandered his chances. He made choices that turned him into the black sheep of the family. Instead of respect, there was shame. Instead of pride, there was gossip. Instead of being the son that everyone admired, he became the son that everyone whispered about.

That story is familiar enough for us today. But it's also very old story, repeated time and again throughout history. Because it's also the story of St. Matthew. We don't get this story in the Bible, of course. We have to piece it together and make some assumption. I think they're pretty safe assumptions though. And they are largely based on Matthew's other name.

We talked about this situation a few weeks ago, on St Bartholomew's day. Lots of people in the New Testament have multiple names, for varying reasons. A personal name versus a family name. A Hebrew name versus a Greek name.

In this case, we have a given name versus a tribal name. Matthew is the name we hear in Matthew's own gospel. But in Mark's gospel, he's called Levi. Presumably because he's of the ancient tribe of Levi.

And if you remember, this was the tribe set apart for God's service. The Levites were the priests, the ones meant to guard and teach God's Word, to serve at His altar, to lead the people in worship. If you had the nickname of Levi, people knew your family line. They knew what you were supposed to become. They had expectations for you.

And yet Matthew the Levite had become a tax collector. Which meant he had become not just a disappointment, but a scandal. Not just wayward, but a betrayer. For a Levite to work for Rome – the occupying enemy, a pagan ruler, collecting blood money for corrupt governors – meant turning his back on his people. On his heritage. On his God.

Becoming a tax collector meant betraying everything out of greed. Becoming unclean and unforgivable for the sake of dirty money. Matthew the Levite was a black sheep. A disgrace. A traitor. A betrayer.

Yet, truthfully, Matthew wasn't that much different from us. Because sin is always a betrayal, no matter what sin it is. Every time we seek the world's favor rather than God's, we betray Him. Every time we cling to money, pride, or self rather than His Word, we betray Him. Every time we use our gifts not to bless but to harm, we betray Him. Like Matthew, we are meant to belong to God, but also like Matthew, we sell ourselves to another master.

And yet, here comes Jesus. Matthew retells the story with such simplicity, *"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."*

That's it. Just two words from Jesus: "Follow Me." He doesn't say, "Matthew, you're a traitor to your people." He doesn't say, "Matthew, you're a disgrace to your tribe." He just says, "Follow Me."

In grace, Jesus calls him. In grace, Jesus calls us. He doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up. He doesn't demand that we prove ourselves worthy. He comes to us in the midst of our sin and rebellion, and He says, "Follow Me."

And in response to His grace, we follow him. We turn from our old ways. We leave behind the life of sin we were pursuing. And we walk in the new life He gives. That's what Matthew did. He rose, left the tax booth, and followed. Not to earn Jesus' love, but because Jesus had already loved him.

He followed Jesus because the Word of God does what it says. Jesus' call is not just an invitation. It's a new creation. When Christ says, "Follow Me," He makes followers. When Christ calls sinners, He creates saints. His Word raises the dead. His Word turns traitors into apostles.

So Levi the betrayer becomes Matthew the disciple. Matthew the apostle. Matthew the evangelist. A fitting fulfillment of his name. Because the name Matthew means "Gift of God." A man who had been the disgrace of his people is now the gift of God to His Church.

But, in the process, it is Jesus himself who becomes a disgrace to his people, by doing something scandalous in the eyes of those who called themselves righteous. Remember, Jesus not only calls Matthew: He goes to eat in Matthew's house.

There, gathered around the table, are tax collectors and sinners. Men and women with reputations. Men and women with shame. Men and women with scars and secrets. And Jesus eats with them.

The Pharisees see it and sneer: "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" To them, this is proof that Jesus is unclean, a fraud, a false prophet. But Jesus answers, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

The mercy of God is scandalous. It doesn't stop with sitting at Matthew's table. It doesn't stop with forgiving sinners who come near. It carries all the way to the cross. For Jesus' mercy means that He takes the sinners' place. The physician does not merely diagnose the sickness. He takes the sickness into Himself. The Holy One allows Himself to be counted among sinners.

So the Son of God hangs on a cross, treated as though He were the worst of men. He dies between two thieves, as if He Himself were a thief. He suffers the death of a rebel, as though He Himself had betrayed others. He bears the shame of a criminal, as though He Himself were guilty.

That is the full scandal of Jesus' mercy: the One who calls sinners, eats with sinners, walks with sinners, suffers with sinners, and finally dies the death of sinners. All so that the betrayer might be beloved. All so that Matthew the tax collector – all so that Joshua the sinner – might be forgiven, restored, and called His own.

And what happens to this Levite called Matthew? The betrayer becomes the beloved. The tax collector becomes the apostle. The Levite who once sat at Caesar's tax booth now sits at the feet of Christ. The traitor who once stole from his people now gives to the whole world the treasure of the Gospel.

St. Paul reminds us in our Epistle, "*Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*"

Matthew was one of those gifts. A man who tore down God's people now builds them up. A man who betrayed God's covenant now records the new covenant in Christ's blood. The Lord turns traitors into apostles. The Lord turns Levi the betrayer into Matthew the gift.

Today, we give thanks that, in the calling of Matthew, we know that Christ does not leave us in our betrayal. He comes to us at our tax booths. He comes to us in our shame and rebellion. And He says the same words: "Follow Me."

And just as Jesus ate with sinners in Matthew's house, so He eats with you today at His table. He doesn't wait until you are clean. He cleanses you by His body and blood. He doesn't wait until you are righteous. He declares you righteous in His mercy. He doesn't wait until you have something to offer. He gives Himself as the gift, the true Matthew, the true Gift of God.

So your story is the same as Matthew's story. From betrayal to beloved. From sinner to saint. From Levi the betrayer to Matthew the gift. He has made us His beloved, His disciples, His gifts to one another in His Church. From betrayal to beloved, this is the story of St. Matthew. And in Christ Jesus, it is your story too. Amen.