

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
February 3, 2019

Jesus, Friend of All: Where are You in the Picture?

Luke 5:27-32



Where's Waldo?

Waldo comes to mind as we look at the last of the **Jesus, Friend of All** messages. The Gospel writer Luke is going to paint a picture of Jesus as a Friend of Sinners. As you see this picture in your mind, ask yourself, "Where am I in this picture?"

Are you...

- The one on the fringe of the crowd?
- The surprised guest?
- The uncomfortable defender?
- The pious enemy?

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. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

1. The One on the Fringe?

"Follow me." I've heard pastors talk about the power of Jesus' word. He said just two words to Matthew, "Follow me," and Matthew left everything and followed him.

Now it could be that those are the first words that Matthew heard from Jesus' lips, but I doubt it. I don't mean to question the power of Jesus' words, but I think Matthew's gospel reveals more to the story.

I say that because recently I've been reading the Gospels with the questions, "How did this Gospel writer know this? Was he an eyewitness or did someone tell him?"

This event is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The only significant difference is that in both Mark and Luke, the main character is called Levi. Only in Matthew's gospel does he clearly identify himself in this picture.¹

Levi Matthew's call into the ministry is recorded in Matthew 9:9-13. There are four miracles I'd like to call to your attention before Matthew's call. The first three are recorded in Matthew 8.

- How did Matthew know about the man healed of leprosy after the Sermon on the Mount?
- How did he know about the healing the centurion's servant?
- How did Matthew know that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and others?
- How did Matthew know about the healing of the paralyzed man who had been let down through the roof? (Matthew 9:1-8)

What did all four of those miracles have in common? They all happened in Capernaum! And where was Matthew collecting taxes? In the Capernaum marketplace. Do you suppose all these things happened without Matthew knowing about them?

Notice in Matthew 5 – 7, Matthew records the longest sermon in the Bible, what we call the Sermon on the Mount. The Mount of Beatitudes, the place that tradition says Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, is less than a mile from Capernaum!

I can't say for sure, but the fact that Matthew records this Sermon on the Mount at great length makes me think that Matthew was there.

But remember, he is a "tax collector." In that culture, the equation looked like this:

Tax collector = sinner

They were despised both because they were collaborators with the Roman occupation force and because they were infamous for charging more for taxes than was required.

I wonder if Matthew had heard about Jesus, probably even heard Jesus himself, but he wasn't good enough even to be part of the crowd. I see him standing on the fringe of the crowd on the Mount of Beatitudes, listening to Jesus, but knowing that he didn't belong.

¹ It was not unusual for people at that time to have two names. Thomas called Didymus. Simon called Peter. Saul who becomes Paul. I appreciate the comment of the Church Father Jerome who, about 400 AD, translated the Bible into Latin. "The other Evangelists from respect to Matthew have not called him by his common name, but say here, Levi, for he had both names. Matthew himself, according to what Solomon says, *The righteous man accuses himself* [Proverbs 18:17 Greek Septuagint translation], calls himself both Matthew and Publican, to show the readers that none need despair of salvation who turn to better things, seeing he from a Publican became an Apostle" (Quoted in an article by Ryan Erlenbush (<http://newtheologicalmovement.blogspot.com/2011/09/whats-in-name-matthew-or-levi.html>)).

Then imagine him, in the busy Capernaum marketplace, minding his own business, when Jesus locks eyes on him and starts walking toward him. What would have been going through Matthew's mind. "Oh no! He is coming over to tell me to stop hanging around on the fringes. He is coming to tell me to 'Get lost!'"

But rather than pushing Matthew farther away, away from the fringes, by those two powerful words, "Follow me," Jesus brings Matthew from the fringes to the very center, to enjoy a close and lasting friendship with his Savior.

I've spent quite a bit of time talking about Matthew, a person out on the fringes, because I wonder how many of us present today see ourselves in the picture in Matthew's place. Do you too feel you are "out on the fringes" and that "you don't belong"?

What does a person on the fringes look like? It can be anyone in this room. In fact, I know people on the fringe who look like this. Pastors with smiles on their faces in public, but in private they feel they don't belong. Their churches are in decline. There is division. Distrust. They have failed. They look like they are at the center of God's church, but they feel out on the fringe.



The person on the fringe may look like this. This is Tara Condell², a 27-year-old nutritionist, living in New York, a world traveler, who seemed to have everything going for herself.

On Wednesday, January 30th, Tara wrote this online note. "I have accepted hope is nothing more than delayed disappointment, and I am just plain old-fashioned tired of feeling tired... It's selfishly time for me to be happy... Shikata ga'nai." That last phrase is a Japanese saying, "It can't be helped." Or "There is nothing you can do about it."

Her co-workers saw this online note and called 911. When the First Responders arrived, they found Tara. She had hung herself. "Shikata ga'nai" "It cannot be helped,"

Some of you here today may be on the fringe in this way. Tired. Disappointed. Unhappy.

The answer isn't "Shikata ga'nai" "It cannot be helped," but to hear the Savior say, "Follow me."

If only you could hear those words from Jesus' lips like Matthew did. Come in from the fringe. You are not an outsider. Come and be my closest friend. Follow me. But Jesus doesn't walk on the earth any more. We can never hear those words from the Savior.

But you perhaps you can. This same Jesus told his friends that they could speak for him, in his name. "Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven" (John 20). When the pastor or worship leader

² <https://nypost.com/2019/01/31/young-manhattan-nutritionist-hanged-herself-after-posting-suicide-note/>

announces that your sins are forgiven, whose voice do you hear? It is Jesus' voice, for we are speaking in Jesus' name. In those words, Jesus is locking eyes on you and saying, "Come in from the fringe. Follow me. Enjoy a friendship that will never end."

Sometimes even that isn't enough. I can feel that Jesus is talking to the crowd, but he is purposely avoiding eye contact with me. He really doesn't mean me.

That is why I so appreciate that we are a sacramental church, celebrating the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Every one of us can go back to a time when Jesus locked eyes with us, very personally, and said, "Follow me." It was in your baptism. In your baptism Jesus walked out to you on the fringe, looked you in the eye, and said, "Follow me." I want you to come in from the fringe, I want you here, in the center, in a friendship with me. Whenever you question if you belong, go back to that unchanging promise that Jesus gave you in your baptism.

In the My Next Steps at the bottom of the sermon outline, we are invited to remember this personal invitation that Jesus has given to you. Read over Galatians 3:26-28 often enough so that it becomes a part of you. "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus.**"

When you see yourself out on the fringe, see Jesus walking up to you in the midst of the crowded world and saying, "Come in from the fringe. Follow me."

2. The Surprised Guest

Perhaps you can see yourself as one of Matthew's guests. I call them surprised guests.

Why would they be surprised? Surprised that Matthew had invited them? Probably not. They were Matthew's friends. Surprised that Matthew was now at the center and not on the fringe? Yes! Surprised that Jesus was right there in the house with them? Yes!

It is my belief that the best training to be an evangelist is simply to retrace your steps and see how you got here. What brought you in from the fringe? When you see that miracle that changed you, you want that for others.

And so you invite... invite to come and worship. Invite to find hope. Invite to find comfort and forgiveness and acceptance.

Perhaps you are sitting next to the Matthew who has invited you to come and enjoy the company of God himself. Maybe it was your spouse who has invited you in. Perhaps it was a friend or a parent or a child.

Every one of us has been brought in from the fringe. Who is surprised by the change that Jesus has worked in you? Who could be surprised by your invitation to come in from the fringe too?

3. The Uncomfortable Defender

It is great to be here, in the center of the action with Jesus. But this is also a place of discomfort. The other disciples found themselves in the role of the “uncomfortable defender.”

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?”

Have you ever been in that role where you feel like you are called upon to defend Jesus? Or perhaps you have done something that you think is what Jesus would want you to do, and then people in the church attack you for doing that?

I’m guessing we’ve all felt that way from time to time. But I appreciate that the disciples didn’t have an answer... but that didn’t mean that they weren’t still welcome in Jesus’ presence.

Brothers and sisters, I think you and I are going to face many a time when we won’t understand what God is doing. We are going to face many a time when fear keeps us from doing that Jesus would do, loving the unlovable and reaching out for those on the fringe. How wonderful that you and I have a Savior who continues to love us and forgive us in spite of our failings!

That forgiveness is especially vital as we see ourselves in that final place in the picture.

4. The Pious Judge

Sadly, this is where we often find ourselves, in the place of the Pharisees in this picture, standing in judgment over God and his people.

Who of us doesn’t have to admit that we compare a “holy” part of our lives with others’ failures. We fail to see that their piety far surpasses ours in other areas of life.

Yes, look at this picture and see yourself as the pious judge like the Pharisees.

Which one of these four is sick and needs a doctor?

- The one on the fringe?
- The surprised guest?
- The uncomfortable defender?
- The pious enemy?

All of them. The great news! Jesus is the Friend of All. In the coming weeks, it is our prayer that we also see ourselves right here at the center... that we who have been brought in from the fringe are right at the center... and that we are willing to be judged by others as we go out to the fringe to draw others around us to Jesus. Amen.

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My Next Steps

- **Follow the one on the fringe:** Read Matthew 4 – 9, a chapter a day. Imagine how a Capernaum resident like Matthew might have heard of these accounts. When might he have been at the fringe of the crowd? Which accounts did he probably hear about from others? Imagine these events drawing Matthew and you in from the fringe of the crowd.
- **Remember your personal invitation:** Memorize Galatians 3:26-28 to remember that in our baptism we receive a personal invitation to come into Jesus' circle of friends: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus.**"
- **Confront the pious judge in yourself:** Spend some quiet time this week considering situations in which you played the Pharisee, looking down on someone like a pious judge. Google "Harvard Prejudice Test" to understand some of your unconscious bias. Celebrate that Jesus is the Friend of all, even pious judges like us.

GroupWork

1. Did you have time off because of the snow and cold? How did you spend your time?
2. Matthew was a man on the fringe of society, detested as a tax collector, a term nearly synonymous with “sinner.” But he worked in Jesus’ adopted hometown of Capernaum, so he probably heard about and perhaps even saw some of the miracles Jesus did there. Put yourself in Matthew’s position. How might these miracles have prepared Matthew to respond to Jesus’ invitation: “Follow me”?
 - a. Matthew 8:5-13 – the healing of the centurion’s servant
 - b. Matthew 8:14-17 – the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law
 - c. Matthew 9:1-8 – the healing of the paralytic
3. Read Matthew 9:9-13. The sermon encouraged us to see ourselves in this account. How do you relate to each of these characters?
 - a. Matthew, the person on the fringe
 - b. The surprised guests at Jesus’ feast
 - c. The disciples, uncomfortable defenders of Jesus’ actions
 - d. The pious judges
4. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Who are the sick in our day who need to learn about Jesus? Are there a group of people that God has especially placed on your heart? How does our congregation reach out to the “sick” that you mentioned? What more could we do? What more could you do personally?
5. Next Sunday we will study the account of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Use the tool of “seeing yourself in this account” to apply this lesson to yourself in preparation for the message.
 - a. The expert in the law
 - b. The man beaten and left for dead
 - c. The priest and the Levite
 - d. The Samaritan
6. Divide into groups of three or four, share prayer concerns, and take turns praying for the needs that someone else in the group has shared with you.