

A Lectionary 10 6.11.23

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26; Genesis 12:1-9

Focus Statement: Jesus calls us to follow and follows after us.

I mentioned last week I'm going to try to preach through both the First Reading and the Gospel texts this summer, so we get a sense of both stories. And I have to say, whoever assembles the lectionary made it really easy for me this week because there is a very clear narrative strain in both readings, a theme of following. In the Gospel, Jesus said to Matthew the tax collector, "follow me" and he got up and followed. And then later, the leader of the synagogue came and asked Jesus to heal his daughter, and Jesus got up and followed him. The interruption of the woman with the hemorrhage doesn't use the word "following," but she came up behind him, and in order to come up behind someone, you kind of have to follow them. And Abram too, while there's no mention of following, God appeared and said, go to the land I will show you, Abram went, and then God appeared again and said, this is the land I am showing you. So one could argue God was following Abram, in whatever way God follows. Point is, there is a lot of following. Abram follows directions, God follows through on God's promise, Jesus calls for following, Matthew follows, Jesus follows the leader to his sick daughter, the hemorrhaging woman was following Jesus. And what's interesting in these stories is who's doing the following shifts and changes. But let's start with Abram.

Last week's "In the beginning" text was really a prequel; this is really where the story starts. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are this big, cosmic, prehistoric tales, creation, the flood, the tower of babel. Stories that encompass all of humanity and stretch across all of creation. And then suddenly, dramatically, we go from the cosmic to the specific, focusing

all our attention on this one family, on this one man. The entire rest of the book of Genesis, a book that started with God creating the heavens and earth and all that is in it, follows the adventures and foibles of Abram and his descendants. We've seen in the first eleven chapters the vastness of God's love, now we are going to lean into the specificity of it. God's care for these people, for this family.

The call of Abram starts rather abruptly, "Now the Lord said to Abram," without any introduction or explanation of who God is or even that God is the one speaking, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." In increasing levels of intimacy, country, kindred, immediate family, God told Abram to leave behind everything he'd ever known and travel to a place he'd never been, with no clear direction other than, "I'll tell you when you get there." This is a crazy ask. Like, this would be a crazy ask today, when we have, like telephones and zoom and cars and airplanes. Imagine this command when it happened, eight-thousand years ago. You go off like this, you're never coming back. And if this whole "go to the land I will show you" thing doesn't work? You are on your own.

But God didn't send Abram with nothing, God sent him with a promise. Four promises, actually. 1) I will make of you a great nation, 2) I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing, 3) I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and 4) in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. There's a ton of great stuff in these four promises, we could be here all day with just this, but here's my favorite. I will bless so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth

shall be blessed. This exclusive blessing of Abram results in the blessing of the whole world. What we see here is so contrary to how the world feels sometimes. The world feels like if I get something, then you don't. If God blesses you, then God can't also bless me. Preview of coming attractions, fighting over blessing will be a thing in Abram's own family in the not-too-distant future. But, today, right now, we see that to not be the case. God blesses Abram so that through Abram the world can be blessed. Abram is blessed to be a blessing. And, the other crazy thing about this promise of blessing is the scope of it. God promises to make Abram a great nation, so that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed. These are not promises that will come true, that even could come true, in Abram's lifetime. These promises are bigger than him, bigger than us. God's call of Abram, promise to Abram, and blessing of Abram reminds us that we don't always get to see the results of our actions, the scope of the work God is doing in and through us. God is doing a huge, earth changing, kingdom bringing thing through Abram, and all he experiences is wandering around in the wilderness and eventually having one son. Which, one son is great, but not exactly a nation. Abram's whole life is a leap that he only sees the first, like, knee-bend of.

Which brings us to Matthew. And here's a fun observational fact for you before we get into the story. Prior to Pastor Ed choosing it as one of the Lenten texts for the midweek services, I had never preached on it before. How early in the Gospel we start is dependent on how early in the year Easter is. For us to get this story, it has to be year A of the lectionary cycle and Easter has to fall on or before April 9<sup>th</sup>, and this is the first time in my career those two things have happened. Notice that April 9<sup>th</sup> is the date of Easter, so we almost missed it

again this year, but it snuck in just in time. Anyway, interesting aside aside, point being, we're really learning this together.

Pastor Ed chose this text for the Lent series because the theme was Jesus eating meals, but this story doesn't start with a meal. This story starts with Jesus walking along and coming across "a man called Matthew sitting at a tax booth." I don't know why the writer of Matthew—no relation, confusingly enough to this Matthew, there are all sorts of double names in scripture, but anyway. I don't know why the writer of Matthew's gospel doesn't just come out and say it, the Matthew in this story was sitting at a tax booth because he was a tax collector. And the religious leadership of Jesus' time was none too friendly with tax collectors.

This dislike of tax collectors, to be clear, was for good reason. They were a sketchy bunch. You think you don't like the IRS, this was even more arbitrary. Here's how taxes worked in the first century. Or at least the taxes collected in booths, the kind Matthew would have been in charge of. They were more like tolls, like the fee you pay to go over the Mackinac Bridge, for example, or take the Ohio Turnpike. Except, we all know what that fee is going to be before we start. Want to cross the Mighty Mac? What is it, four dollars? The Ohio turnpike, I have an iPass, so I don't actually know the exact cost, but it's based on where you get off and on, and it's the same for every car. This was not the case in the first century. People like Matthew would bid for the job of being the guy who collected the fares. Whoever offered Rome the most money got the job. They would then pay Rome and

anything over and above that was pure profit. Which meant, there was the incentive to set the toll as high as you could to maximize your own income.

The presence of a tax collector hints us in the direction of this being a story about money. Which wouldn't be a bad guess, because you know what was among Jesus' favorite topics to talk about was? Right up there with prayer, salvation, and the Kingdom of God, is money. Jesus had thoughts about how we spend our resources. But this isn't a story about money, as much as the Pharisees in verse eleven probably wanted it to be. This is a story about following and fellowship, and who has a place in the presence of God.

So Jesus walked up to this tax collector and he said, "Follow me." Which is Jesus' line for when he wants someone to become a disciple. And not just like, a casual follower, but a disciple-disciple. One of the twelve. And as frequently happened when Jesus made this request, the text tells us, "He got up and followed him."

But, check this. The problem with pronouns is that they're vague. When it said, "he followed him", one might assume, I did, that Matthew followed Jesus. But look where they ended up in the next verse, eating a meal at Matthew's house. With Matthew's colleagues. Jesus said to Matthew, "follow me," and then he followed Matthew home.

Dear people of God, besides all the boundary-breaking, Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, making the stuff-shirt Pharisees mad, here's why that observation is super cool, amazing, and powerful. Jesus followed Matthew home because Jesus gave Matthew the first

opportunity to be the host. He let Matthew have the power, he let Matthew bring him to his house, stay in his comfort zone. Jesus called Matthew to follow, but then he went to Matthew's place, so that Matthew could know that he was being called to follow Jesus not because Jesus saw him as a project that needed to be fixed, but because Jesus saw him as an important part of the work of the Kingdom of God.

And in accomplishing what Jesus will state as his mission, "to call not the righteous but sinners," Matthew turned out to be a good person to follow, because Matthew led Jesus right into a whole bunch of his colleagues, a big group of people who also needed to know they were loved by God, also needed to be met with the good news of the Kingdom. To connect it to Abram, Jesus called Matthew to follow him, followed Matthew, and Matthew led Jesus to the exact sort of people who needed, wanted, Jesus' blessing. Matthew was blessed to bless his colleagues, called to follow, to lead Jesus to his friends.

Just like Abram, Matthew was called to leave everything he knew and follow. And in following, both men found themselves leading God to the places where others could be blessed. Dear people of God, not all of us are called to be like Abram, to leave everything behind us and move to another country. And definitely none of us are called to start a whole brand new nation in that country as if no other people lived there first, Abram lived in a very different time with a very different number of people in the world. But, God calls all of us to follow. God blesses each of us, and we bless others, and others bless us, in this beautiful, complicated unveiling of the kingdom of God. And, here's the other complicated good news/promise/challenge in this text, being blessed and being a blessing takes time.

Abram lived over eight-thousand years ago, and we're still figuring out what it means that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed. God's time is not our time. We get glimpses, pieces, snapshots of the promise, but we don't get to see the whole picture. Nor could we, God's love is too vast for our understanding. What we get is simply this, and this, for me, is enough. We are called to follow. WE are called to follow, and in following, God follows us. Wherever we go, wherever this promise takes us, the highest highs and the lowest lows, the banquet feast and the bedside, reaching out in desperation and falling down in praise, there too, with us, follows Jesus. Our leader and our follower, who is, and was, and is to come. Thanks be to God who is always here. Amen.