

We live in a lonely world. One survey says that 3 in 5 Americans feel lonely on a regular basis. The pandemic didn't help, but things weren't ideal even before then. This isn't just older people living as widows or widowers, young people also feel lonely. God made us for community. God made us to be together.

Jesus could have done the work of the ministry alone, but He chose to do it with a team. He chose to do it with friends. Many of our scenes in the Gospels take place at a meal or in crowds, and today's reading is no exception. We see the calling of Matthew, and we see the ensuing feast that Matthew hosts. **BECAUSE JESUS EATS WITH SINNERS, WE CAN KEEP AN OPEN DOOR TO OTHERS.**

First, I. Because Jesus called Matthew, we can follow Jesus also. Life for Matthew must have been lonely. He was a Jewish Tax Collector. Because he was Jewish, he didn't quite fit in with the Romans. The Roman occupiers likely viewed Jews as beneath them. Because he was a tax collector, he didn't fit in with the Jews. He was essentially stealing from the Jews to pay for the Roman boots that stood on the Jews' necks. Perhaps his own parents disowned him for such dishonorable work.

But everything in his life changed. He records it simply in the Gospel he authored, **“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.”** It was as simple as that. With Jesus came a new life and a new community. Perhaps Matthew had these words of Jesus on His mind, who said **“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”** Matthew left his old life and entered into the life of the Church, a welcoming, loving, and forgiving family.

So too, it doesn't matter who you are, Jesus is calling you to follow Him. He is calling you from a life that is ultimately lonely and unfulfilling to a life of hope, adventure, and community. It doesn't matter what your past was, your occupation, or what kinds of sins you've committed. Jesus is calling you to follow Him to be His disciple.

His path is a path to the cross, which means it won't be without challenges, but it's a path that will bring blessing through the forgiveness of sins. Every one of your sins has been forgiven by Jesus who paid your debts to God. It brings you blessing through community, even though we are lonely, Christ promises His very presence, and He gives you the community of the Church.

How does Matthew celebrate such an event? He invites Jesus to a feast. Matthew's account doesn't tell us this, but it's Luke's Gospel where we read: **“And Levi—which is another name for Matthew—made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others**

reclining at table with them.” II. Because Matthew invited Jesus to dinner, we can open our doors to other Christians.

In those days—perhaps it’s even the same today—who you ate with said a lot about who you fit in with. Jews weren’t allowed to eat with Gentiles and vice versa. To eat with tax collectors and sinners was a sign that in some way you accepted them and identified with them.

Jesus’ disciples were likely not a little nervous about such a prospect, but that became regular occurrence throughout Jesus’ ministry. Did some of the disciples hate Matthew’s guts for being a tax collector? The Bible doesn’t say either way, but perhaps it’s a safe guess.

It also took a leap of faith for Matthew to invite Jesus to dinner. Matthew knew who he was, and he knew how he was not welcome in Jewish circles. After seeing the crowd Matthew hung out with, maybe Jesus would have uninvited Matthew from discipleship. Maybe Jesus would have scolded him when he saw the ill gotten gains in his house.

Perhaps we’re lonely because we’ve faced rejection. We’ve invited people and they never came. Why would they want to hang out with me? My house is too messy, I’m awkward, and they have better things to do. Perhaps we have burned bridges of our own. I recall the song *Cat’s in the Cradle* by Harry Chapin which tells the story of a dad who was too busy for his son. When the dad retires, the shoe’s on the other foot and the son is too busy for the dad.

Matthew had faith that Jesus wasn’t going to judge his house or stick his nose up at the menu choice, and the result is a feast that we read about in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

You guys asked me an unfair question back in October: what is my favorite part of being a pastor. Which was kind of like asking a kid in a candy shop to pick one candy to take home with him. But I think home visits are certainly on my top three of favorite aspects of the ministry. About 70% of members I’ve either been to your house or at least knocked on your door. I love hearing your story. I love getting to know you. Of course, that also happens at church as well.

I don’t care how the inside of your house looks. I don’t care if your hair is messy. I don’t need a tour of every nook and cranny. I’m just happy to be there. . I love home visits because I want to know which way to start driving when you call with an emergency.

As Christians, we have the privilege to invite others. We can invite others, especially fellow members at church into our homes and into our lives and together, we can be less lonely. As we’re invited and we invite others, we can just be happy to be there as we share the joys and challenges of life together.

My challenge for you is this: take a directory from the narthex, we printed out new phone directories, and try calling someone at church and inviting them for

lunch or dinner at your house. No cheating and inviting someone you already have dinner with regularly. It doesn't have to be a fancy dinner, but I think you'll find in just sitting across the table from someone new, you'll make a connection with someone and we'll be closer knit as a community here at Faith Lutheran.

What inspired Matthew to take such a leap of faith to invite Jesus? III. Because Jesus came to dinner with Matthew, we can know we are loved. Our text concludes with inspiring words of Jesus: **“But when he heard it, he said, “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.””**

Matthew took a leap of faith to invite Jesus, but Jesus came! As we go out into this world, we can have courage to invite that person over, to call up an estranged family member, or to knock on that door we know that even if we are rejected by them, we're never rejected by Jesus.

Jesus is happy to dwell with us, and in fact, He even shares a meal with us. Better than steak on the grill, Jesus gives us His very body and blood to eat and is present in a meal in which we receive not only forgiveness of sins, but communion and community with God and with one another. I'll grant it to you, this next thing is hard to believe, but we're better off than those who ate and drank a common meal with Jesus throughout the Gospels because we get something special in the meal of the Lord's Supper that's more than mere bread and wine.

Likewise, through baptism, we have been washed and cleansed into a wonderful family. In baptism, we have put on Christ and we're part of a family of believers who love and are loved by the Lord Himself. Baptism means that you have a place. Baptism means that you belong. Baptism means you're never alone.

Dear Christian friend, you can go forward this week knowing that you are loved by the Almighty Himself. If you lived in the time of Jesus, He would have been happy to eat under your roof, and He would have loved to hear your story. He is happy to be your physician of soul, to forgive you and restore you to new life.

Confident of this, we can gladly tell the story of the one who called Matthew the tax collector, and redeemed sinners. Amen