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Life: Past, Present, Future
Matthew 9:9-13

Barbara De Angelis describes herself as a relationship consultant, lecturer, author, TV personality, personal growth adviser, and spiritual teacher. Her best sellers include *Are You The One for Me? Knowing Who's Right and Avoiding Who's Wrong* and *How to Find the Right Man for the Real You*. She's been married five times (one spouse, John Gray, is author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*). Hmmm. Sometimes life just gets messy. We find ourselves in places we never expected. We wonder what the future holds ...

The Past: Who Was Matthew?

Matthew, also known as Levi, might have been that kind of person, too. He was a tax collector in Capernaum (Luke 2:1), an important hub city, a crossroads of east-west and north-south highways. "Tax collector" was not one of those high-status professions.

In those days, tax collectors were independent contractors who paid a fee to the Roman government to collect taxes on Rome's behalf. Matthew would have been despised as a traitor by his fellow Jews for collaborating with the Roman occupation. To add fuel to the fire, tax collectors, like Matthews, added exorbitant service charges to pay the fee for the "privilege" of collecting taxes for Rome, to pay their employees, and to line their own pockets. Tax collectors were hated and ostracized – right down among the dregs of society with prostitutes and other notorious sinners. They also could make a LOT of money.

How did Matthew get to this place? How does a Jewish man end up (1) being a traitor to his own people, (2) being ostracized by his own people (probably including his own family), (3) having a friendship circle made up of "sinners" (Matthew 9:10)? Was he just greedy? Had he been bullied? Was he just desperate for a job? What is his story? We have no idea ...

How did we get where we are, today? We ALL have a story. We can look at our own lives, count our blessings and list our sorrows, identify successes and recognize failures, see things we're proud of and things we're ashamed of, talk about good things and hold hurts and griefs, abuses and pains that are too deep to share with anyone.

Those things have shaped who we are. The people, events, opportunities, relationships, and experiences we have had may not define everything about who we are and how we have got to this place in this time, but they have undeniably influenced our lives along the way. We may be aware of some of these forces; we are undoubtedly not aware of all of them.

It's good to remember that the people we meet all have stories as well. No one comes into our lives with a blank slate. People have been shaped and influenced by people and events they may or may not be aware of. They have had experiences – good and not so good – relationships – excellent and awful – joys and sorrows, opportunities and frustrations, good health and health challenges. We do well have compassion for all people.

The Present: Who Is Matthew?

At this moment, a new event, a new person, comes into Matthew's life. Jesus. Jesus does not "share the gospel" with Matthew. He does not confront Matthew about his abuse of his Jewish neighbours. He does not judge Matthew for his greed. He does not point out Matthew's sins. Jesus simply says, "Follow me" (9:9).

Italian painter, Caravaggio (1571-1610), has a brilliant painting of the [Calling of Matthew](#), in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Caravaggio was one of those painters for whom every detail intentionally has meaning. In Caravaggio's masterpiece, Matthew is sitting at a table with four other men, all dressed in the height of expensive Italian fashion of his day. If he were painting this today, he would paint a group of Bay Street bankers or drug cartel bosses gathered around the table. It's a dark and shady room, reflecting the dark and shady business Matthew is up to, counting his ill-gotten gains.

Jesus and Peter have just entered the room. Unlike the wealthy tax collector, they are dressed as labourers of the times, without even any shoes on their feet – common people.

Jesus is pointing at Matthew. Matthew, the bearded man, is pointing at himself, as if to ask "Who? Me?" in response to Jesus' call. A beam of light (almost a lightning bolt) follows Jesus' pointing finger, casting light on the shady deals being done in this dark room and lighting up the faces – almost blinding – the men huddled around the table. Two worlds collide in this painting: the dingy, dreary, shady, money-grubbing world of Matthew and the bright, pure, holy world of the kingdom of heaven. Following the line of Jesus' left arm, Matthew is being invited to follow Jesus into the world.

For serious Bible scholars and art critics among us, Caravaggio purposely copies key elements in Michelangelo's painting of the Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, also in Rome.

- The position of Jesus arm/hand is the same as the position of **God's hand** in Michelangelo's painting: Jesus, God, is creating new life in Matthew. He is reborn.
- The shape of Jesus' hand is the same as the shape of **Adam's hand** in Michelangelo's painting. One of the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament is the "second Adam" or the "last Adam." For instance, Paul says that *"the sin of one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. ... For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God"* (Romans 5:15-16): Jesus, through his obedient death on the cross, pays the price for our sins, so that sinful people, like Matthew (and us) can be made righteous. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues *that "just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life"* (15:22): people, like Matthew, are reborn through the touch of Jesus.

This is a call to repentance. Matthew is being called away from his old way of life into a new life. Jesus meets Matthew where he is but will not leave him there. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, better known as Pope Francis, commented in an interview that as a young man he often went to San Luigi to contemplate the painting. Referring to Jesus' outstretched arm and Matthew's

response, Francis said, *"This is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze."*

Matthew is being called from an old set of values to a new set of values. He is being called to put on a whole new life, a life marked by walking with and sharing life with Jesus. Significantly, Matthew immediately got up and followed Jesus (9:9). He had no idea where this was going to lead, but he knew he wanted to be with Jesus, whatever that might entail.

Who are you, today? Do you find yourself feeling you're in a bit of a dingy, dreary world? Worrying about the news? Worrying too much about your investment portfolio and income tax? Worrying about your health? Worrying about this, that, and the other thing?

Where is Jesus in your life, at this moment? If you were to think of yourself in your home, would Jesus be:

- in the same room with you? You regularly have conversations about life, the universe, and everything? You share what's on your mind? You are interested in what on His mind? In the words of Brother Lawrence, we practice the presence of God, and *"establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him."*
- in the house, but maybe in the next room? You are aware of His presence in your life; you could call on Him if you needed to; but by and large you go about your own business and (we assume) He goes about His?
- out in the yard somewhere? You go about life on your own. But if you really, really needed Him and cried, *"Lord, help me!"* you think He'd hear?
- not even on the same planet?

Jesus comes to all of us as He comes to Matthew. He wants to come into our lives. To a church full of people, a lot like Matthew, Jesus says, *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends"*(Revelation 3:20). Then He calls us to follow Him, into the real world.

What if Jesus were to shine a light into your life? What would you see? Jesus says to those troubled church people, a lot like Matthew: *"I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! ... You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked ..."*(Revelation 3:15-17).

Jesus calls us away from our old way of life into a new life. Jesus meets us where we are but will not leave us there. We are called from an old set of values to a new set of values. We are called to put on a whole new life, a life marked by walking with and sharing life with Jesus. We've no idea where this is going to lead. Will we step out in faith and simply follow?

The Future: Who Will Matthew Become?

Matthew was an average guy (actually as a tax collector he was lower than the average guy). People would have thought him beneath God's notice. Or, even if Jesus noticed him, no one would have expected Matthew to amount to much. But notice who Matthew becomes:

1. Matthew invites Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests. Matthew doesn't just invite Jesus and Jesus' friends. Matthew invites HIS friends: other tax collectors and other disreputable sinners (9:10). He has found new life in Jesus, and he wants to share Jesus with all his buddies. When the Jewish leaders complain about His company, Jesus responds, *"Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners"* (9:12-13). Note it's those who **"think"** they are righteous (suggesting they aren't really) – in other words, who are lukewarm – who are the problem. In truth, we ALL need Jesus. *"A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle."*
2. Shortly after that, Jesus sends out his twelve disciples (including Matthew) to *"Go and announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is near"* (10:6). It's short term mission trip, where Matthew and the others get to share God's love in word and deed (*"heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons"* (10:8)).
3. Matthew will follow Jesus for the rest of Jesus' earthly ministry. After Jesus' death, he will be one of those who first hear about Jesus' resurrection and see Jesus (Luke 24). He will be a witness to Jesus' ascension into heaven (Acts 1).
4. Early Christian writers, like Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, go on to say Matthew preached the good news about Jesus to the Jewish community in Judea, before going to other countries, including Syria, Parthia (Iraq), and Persia (Iran). According to tradition, Matthew ended up near the Caspian Sea. The local king lusted after his own niece, but she was a nun, betrothed to Christ. Matthew rebuked the king for his advances. On the king's orders, Matthew was murdered while celebrating Mass.
5. Somewhere along the line, Matthew gathered together stories of Jesus' life and teachings into the collection we know as the Gospel of Matthew. As a tax collector, he would have been fluent in Aramaic and Greek. As a Galilean Jewish Christian, he would have been able to connect Old Testament prophecies with Jesus' life and ministry as he often does. Matthew is the one gospel writer who records for us the Sermon on the Mount. Without Matthew, we may not have had that teaching of Jesus preserved.

Sometimes we find ourselves in places we never thought we would be. Life is messy. *"This is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze."* That might be Matthew's testimony. It would also be mine. The good news of Matthew's story is that no one is beyond God's love. No one is beyond God's redemption. Where we have been in the past, and where we are now, need not define our future. God stands at the door of each of our lives, knocking, asking to be let in – to share a good meal together. To enjoy one another's company. He will not leave us there. Then we go out into the world together.

"Follow me," says Jesus. Leave the past behind. Make a change – today. Begin a new journey, with a new future. When we respond to Jesus, only God knows what our lives might become. God is knocking. He's shining His light into my life. Will I follow?