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## *Proficient to 'Desire Mercy Not Sacrifice'*

**An Evensong homily by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**The Feast of St. Matthew, *observed***

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story goes that a child was told after dinner one day to take only one of the treats when desserts were being served.

“Take only one of the treats, my child,” the parent said. “That’s plenty enough for a child your size.”

But then the parent turned around, after talking to others at the table, and discovered that the child had eaten two of the treats instead of just one. Whereupon the parent asked the child, “Why did you eat two instead of one?” And this was the child’s answer:

“I told myself to take only one, but my hand took two anyway.”

That’s right: the child said, “I told myself not to take the second one, but my hand did it anyway.”

I like that story because children say so simply and honestly the truth about reality for all of us. This is the truth that we all do things contrary to our best intentions, and contrary to our best interests. Yes, we also do things contrary to our best interests because too often we don’t know what is in our best interest. And that’s the truth that Jesus speaks to in our gospel reading for today, when he says to his listeners:

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Yes, that’s all of us really—“not the righteous but sinners;” because when our true interests are taken into account many of us transgress or violate them. However, some of us are made to be more in touch with how far short we fall from being righteous. And that takes us directly to our observance of the Feast of St. Matthew appointed here today. For Matthew first came to Jesus’ attention precisely because he was one of those people about whom Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

Indeed that’s reason why respectable Jews avoided tax collectors like Matthew; because they were typically dishonest. In fact, the job itself carried no salary, so that if they were to make a living they had to extort their fees from their clients. In addition to that:

Patriotic and nationalistic Jews hated them because they were agents of the Roman government, the conquerors... with a double hatred if (like Matthew) they were Jews, because they had...had betrayed their own people for money. Thus, throughout the Gospels, we find tax collectors (publicans) mentioned as a standard type of sinful and despised outcast.

Now imagine that Matthew brought many of his former associates to meet Jesus, so that social outcasts in general were shown that the love of Jesus extended even to them. <http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/IEK/home.html>

The “love of Jesus”—what an endearing expression! And here I want to apply it to Matthew in particular, as one of those

'social outcasts in general who were shown that the love of Jesus extended even to them.' What might it have been like for Matthew to find himself embraced by this rabbi Jesus as if he were beloved like a child instead of despicable as a tax collector?

I imagine that he would have felt like Timothy would have felt after hearing Paul in today's other reading appointed for the feast of St. Matthew. Writing to Timothy after calling himself, "an apostle of Christ Jesus," Paul went on to call Timothy, "my beloved child" (2 Timothy 1:1-2). And in today's passage, he wrote:

As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing . . . how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:14

Well, today is the perfect day to speculate about what it might have meant for the sinner Matthew to have also been regarded as "a beloved child" *before* he became the Apostle Matthew. It's an appropriate speculation because of our regular, morning gospel reading assigned for today (Book of Common Prayer, Proper 21; 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost):

[Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:36-37)

Now we can't possibly know about the childhood of St. Matthew, but I speculate that he had the kind of childhood where he was not welcomed the way that Jesus prescribed in today's other gospel reading. Rather, he was more likely punished in a harsh manner for doing the kind of things children typically do—things like disobeying when told to take only one dessert treat instead of two. What if, instead of being harshly punished and habitually shamed, a child's misbehavior is treated as a learning opportunity; learning the way Paul prescribes for Timothy in our first reading appointed for today's Feast of St. Matthew:

how from childhood you have known . . . [what] is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

What if our "reproof" or "correction" of children were a "training in righteousness," as Paul says to Timothy, not a shaming punishment but a learning opportunity that makes them "proficient" or "equipped for every good work?" What if that were the norm of childrearing, to learn what makes for "every good work" and for everyone's well-being; for one's own best interests and everyone else's? Indeed, I suspect that's the way one grows up doing despicable things. I suspect that as a child when we disobey or get punished for some misbehavior, and we are made to feel so ashamed and despicable for who we are, that we grew up with that state as our norm or status quo for what to do in the world. Yes, managing things for which one gets shamed or despised becomes familiar and habitual because that was the way we were taught.

Well, enough speculation! How about the import of Matthew's apostleship for us? What is the significance or meaning of his key story and witness for us today? For today we are also confronted by despicable behavior between people, and by the call for shaming punishments to be directed at key figures in our public life and on our national scene. Certainly, our misbehaviors need reproof and correction. That's how we learn what is truly in our own best interests and in the interest of others. But let us also pray for others, as well as ourselves, that reproof and correction be administered in the Spirit of the one who 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, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Admitting with St. Matthew our own faults as sinners, let us also like him become apostolic heralds of the One who showed us love and mercy, as well as gave us reproof and correction. Yes, let us also become "proficient" to "desire mercy, not sacrifice," as we pray again our Collect for St. Matthew:

We thank thee, heavenly Father, for the witness of thine apostle and evangelist Matthew to the Gospel of thy Son our Savior; and we pray that, after his example, we may with ready wills and hearts obey the calling of our Lord to follow him; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and

forever. Amen.

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