

*Brandt Leonard Montgomery*  
*Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5, Year A)*  
*Sunday, June 8, 2008 (Eve of Columba, Abbot of Iona)*  
Hosea 5:15-6:6, Psalm 50 or 50:7-15, Romans 4:13-18, Matthew 9:9-13

“...He saw a man called Matthew...and He said to him, ‘Follow me.’”  
(Matthew 9:9)

*To God the Father, who first loved us and made us accepted in the Beloved;  
To God the Son, who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own Blood; To  
God the Holy Ghost, who sheds the love of God abroad in our hearts—Be all love,  
and all glory, for time and for eternity. Amen!*

When I was a small boy growing up at Jacob’s Chapel C. M. E. Church in Talladega, Alabama, there was an elderly woman who I always enjoyed being around. Mrs. Bernice Trescott was a lady whose strong faith and love for God served as a great example for everybody that knew her (and for me later on in the coming years). I remember that on the fourth Sunday of every month, the children’s choir would sing for the morning service and Mrs. Trescott would come with her daughter-in-law, who served as the choir director. After every fourth Sunday service, I would help Mrs. Trescott to her daughter-in-law’s car to go back home. I can still remember and visualize Mrs. Trescott pointing her aged index finger at me and telling me, with a tone of absolute seriousness, “You are going to be a preacher someday. I just know it.” Being raised to be a respectful gentleman, I showed politeness in regard to her observation. In my mind, I was thinking to myself, “Old lady, you have got to be crazy.” At the time, I was more fascinated in the world of politics. The thought of power, authority, and regulation intrigued me with great enthusiasm. Pictures of me with former state governors and other various public officials were adorned all around my living room. I was a goal-driven young man who was determined not to let anything get in his way of accomplishing his political goals. To me, church was just something that was the proper thing to do.

But at the age of 13, I began to feel a change occur within me. The first occurrence of this change came during a summer youth revival when the preacher spoke on the Old Testament text of the call of Jeremiah. The second occurrence came some months later during a Sunday church service with my pastor preaching on the call of Isaiah. These two incidences made me feel, just as John Wesley did, my heart becoming “strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” These experiences caused me to develop a deeper interest in my Christian faith. I found myself paying more attention to the reading of the Holy Scriptures and feeling a hunger for them. I was developing a closer relationship to Jesus and praying

more. My time with Jesus was becoming the best and most important time to me. As I went through these experiences, I remembered Mrs. Trescott's observation from several years before and began to realize that through her zealous witness, God was telling me that what He had in store was much, much better than the world of politics.

Today's Gospel text centers on the call of Matthew—an inspiring account of Jesus uttering the words “follow me” and someone answering the call instantly. Being a tax collector, Matthew was considered a traitor and a thief—a Jew hired to carry out Rome's dirty work. Considering his occupation, Matthew was most likely financially well off, lacked nothing in regards to material needs, and was probably able to put on lavish parties and banquets, entertaining important public officials and wealthy friends.

But through the account of today's Gospel, I can't help but to imagine that there was something different that Jesus saw in Matthew. Jesus looks beyond all of Matthew's faults and indiscretions and sees in him someone that could be used as an instrument of God's peace. Jesus sees a man hated by all and treats him with grace and mercy. I can imagine Matthew seeing Jesus come closer and closer to him with a look not of condemnation or disapproval, but of love and compassion. By the look from Jesus' eyes, Matthew probably senses that Jesus knows that a tax collector's life is one that he is tired of living. Matthew wants to experience the peace, happiness, and excitement of life that he has not been able to enjoy. By His call, Jesus extends to Matthew an invitation to a life of redemption and renewal. By accepting the call, Matthew leaves behind a comfortable life and a handsome paycheck for a life of honor and great destiny. Materially, Matthew loses much; spiritually, Matthew gains a fortune.

As we reflect upon today's Gospel, I am sure that we all can see a bit of Matthew reflected in us. Like Matthew, we suffer from our own faults and indiscretions that we may feel are undeserving of God's mercy. Through it all, it is important for us to realize that “there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea...there is welcome for the sinner...there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in His blood.” By having hearts like Matthew's—hearts that long for Jesus' love and compassion—we make ourselves worthy recipients of God's grace. Like Matthew, Jesus becomes for us the Good Shepherd that will never lose us, the Physician who heals our broken spirits, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins that cling so closely. When Jesus calls us to new life in Him, He makes us fresh and clean and bestows unto us the gift of God's presence in our lives.

By accepting the call to follow Jesus, we are saying yes to a life filled with experiences unlike we have ever experienced before. Our choice to follow Jesus allows us the opportunity of experiencing the richness and wideness of God's

mercy and to be transformed from being pitiful sinners to saints of God. To say yes to Jesus is to be saved by God's grace, feel His comforting presence, and never be separated from the love that is in Christ Jesus. By following Jesus and trusting Him, we open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit and, just like Matthew, become instruments of God's peace in the world.

Further along in the Gospel, we hear of Jesus and His disciples having dinner with tax collectors and sinners, the social outcasts of the time. The Pharisees, clearly seeing a social *faux pas* in play, try to call Jesus out on this. Jesus' response, "...I desire mercy, not sacrifice," is one that is important for us to remember and fix into our minds. What Jesus is telling us is that we should treat people right instead of us always wanting to be right. As members of the body of Christ, it is our bounden duty to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Episcopalians, we commit ourselves to this responsibility by proclaiming the Good News to all of creation. Being disciples of Christ as Anglican Christians is stating to the world that we are willing to reach out to those whom others are unwilling to reach out to. Christ commands us to bestow love to the sick, the friendless, the needy, people suffering with addictions and diseases, to ALL people, seeing them with the same love and compassion in which Christ sees them and giving them the assurance that ALL people have a place in the household of God. When we carry out our Lord's command, we bring to life the essential message of our Church: Christ welcomes ALL.

While back home attending the opening Eucharist of the convention of the Diocese of Alabama this past February, our new suffragan bishop, the Right Reverend John McKee Sloan, preached a sermon during which he told a story about a time he was dating a young lady who he says was in a pretty snooty sorority and how he was feeling unsure about himself. His story continued as follows:

*It was the mid-seventies and I was making a statement. I'm not sure really what the statement was, but it involved wearing jeans or overalls to class and old tennis shoes or flip-flops...I think my crisis began when the sorority girl suggested that I might want to change clothes before I came to see her again. She suggested that I could wear khaki pants and an Oxford-cloth shirt; I told her I didn't have those things; she made some suggestions about where I might be able to purchase some; I told her I didn't have money to waste on frat boy clothes and it sort of went downhill from there. So instead of going to see my girlfriend....I went to camp to go fishing...*

*I told Jimmie Lee all about it. We were out on the lake...the sun was going down and the mosquitoes were starting to find us. He let me talk until I was done and then he said, "Ain't nobody no better than you." I liked that; I thought he was saying that I was somehow remarkable and even superior and I think he probably read those thoughts in my reaction. He could tell I was going from deflated and discouraged to*

*puffed up and cocky, so he said, "And you ain't no better than nobody else..." He told me that both of those ideas had to be true or neither of them could be true...I argued with him, the way college kids will, and told him that it was a nice idea, but that clearly some of us are born rich, some poor, some black, some white, some gifted and intelligent, and some burdened with disabilities and difficulties. He told me that in God's eyes we're all the same, that God loves all of His children the same...And [that] God loves you more than your Mama.*

Through our Gospel, Jesus is extending to us the gift of grace. By accepting that grace, we become the recipients of new life in Christ, being "...marked as Christ's own for ever." He is calling us to walk with Him in faith. He is calling us to discipleship, demanding an end to the old and putting Him and the needs of others first. He is calling us to spread His light that glows within us to all the dark places in our world. He is calling us into relationship with Him, welcoming us with open arms as members of His forgiven, redeemed, and resurrected community of faith.

As I come to the end of my internship, reflecting on my time among you, I have come to regard St. Michael and All Angels as a parish filled with enthusiastic and committed examples of following Christ and loving others as Christ loves you. Being a part of the daily work of this parish has made St. Michael's mission of "...building up the kingdom of God through the power of Almighty God, the love of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" come alive. You are a very humble people, thankful to God for all of your blessings. Observing you all unselfishly offer yourselves to serve those less fortunate in your community has made me thankful and blessed by God to have received the opportunity of being among you these past ten months. The kind words, warm hospitality, and spirited friendship that has been extended to me by this parish has made the work and ministry that I have tried to bestow a true blessing. Your sincere kindness and fortitude in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and love are aspects of you that I will carry back with me to my beloved Alabama. By being here, I have learned so much and have felt my heart, once again, being "strangely warmed." For the lessons that I have learned from you, I am profoundly grateful.

Never forget that you are children saved by grace and recipients of the love of God. Never forget that you are a disciple of Christ and to always have faith in the risen Lord. Always thirst after Christ's righteousness and be open to the power of the Holy Spirit. Always follow Jesus, knowing that He will always be with you and never let you go. May God always give the community of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church (Dallas, Texas) the grace to live and walk as forgiven, redeemed, and resurrected people of God.

*Let us pray.*

*We thank you, heavenly Father, for the witness of your apostle and evangelist Matthew to the Gospel of your 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 lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN!*