

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Festival of St. Matthew. Matthew is numbered among Jesus' closest disciples, one of the twelve, who with Jesus' commission would go forth as an apostle and who would write a Gospel — the first of our Gospels — telling the good news of Jesus.

Matthew, perhaps, is the most unlikely of Jesus' disciples; after all, he was a tax collector, and most Jews would not have considered a tax collector as disciple material. But Jesus wasn't deterred. Today, we heard Jesus call Matthew while he was sitting at his *"tax booth."* *"Follow me,"* Jesus said to this sinner, in league with the occupying Romans, himself likely a liar, a cheat, and a thief.

Some Pharisees watched as more tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus; and He sat down and ate with them! That prompted the Pharisees to murmur to the other disciples about it: *"Why does your teacher"* do this? Why does He *"eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* "How inappropriate," they thought; and we shake our heads at those Pharisees' attitudes.

Yet, I wonder. Are we any different? Whom do we desire in the Lord's house? Whom do we invite? Whom do we receive as Jesus' disciples? The doctor, the lawyer, the prosperous businessman? In general, the pillars of society? While ignoring and excluding the homeless, the poor, the downtrodden, the despised? In general, the less desirable of the world?

Repent! Jesus came for the world ... to die for the world's sins. His atonement excludes no one. More than that, Jesus called unlikely disciples like us — all of us wretched sinners — to follow Him. We must not now exclude anyone. Rather, intentionally, as Jesus did, the church must seek out and invite into her holy spaces and holy times people who are not so holy — people like Matthew.

Of course, we do it, not affirming their sinfulness or encouraging them in it. We do it to convert them, to turn them away from their sin, and to offer the forgiving words and sacred acts of a Savior. As Peter said, *"God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"* (Acts 10:34-35).

Jesus never endorsed sin. When He called Matthew to follow Him, what did Matthew do? He rose, setting aside his life of tax-collecting thievery, and became a physician of the soul. When Jesus encountered Mary Magdalene, He cast the demon out of her first; then she became His disciple (Luke 8:2). When Jesus encountered the woman caught in adultery, He did not condemn her, but forgave her, and then called her to *"sin no more"* (John 7:53–8:11). And when Jesus encountered another tax-collector, Zacchaeus, He moved that sinner to a conversion (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus changed his life; he promised to give back

to the poor and make restitution for his thievery. And Jesus commended this change, amidst more grumbling: *“Today salvation has come to this house, ... for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

Surely, Christ’s church is not a social club for the rich and powerful, or the young and handsome. It’s not a club for those who, like the Pharisees, consider themselves righteous on their own and have no need of salvation. As the Blessed Virgin Mary sang, such rich persons, He sends away empty (Luke 1:53), and the mighty, He brings down from their thrones (Luke 1:52). For Jesus says, *“I [did not come] to call the righteous, but sinners,”* even manifest, despised sinners.

There’s not much I liked about the reign of Francis as pope, but I do commend him for some things. Shortly after his elevation to pope, for example, He gave an interview.¹ In it, he talked about going to the Church of St. Louis of the French in Rome. In that church there is a painting by the master Caravaggio, called The Calling of St. Matthew. In it, Caravaggio paints Jesus as pointing to Matthew as He calls him. The problem is, it’s not clear to whom Jesus is pointing, for there are five persons around the table. But in the painting there’s one who seems to be pointing incredulously to himself, as his other hand is still on the coins. I think that’s Matthew. It’s as if Matthew is saying: “You couldn’t mean a sinner like me, Lord.” Pope Francis said he identified with Matthew: “That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew” ... an unworthy sinner. I wish Francis’ whole pontificate would have been like that.

Remember how Jesus answered the Pharisees? *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”* In the same interview, Francis went on to speak about the church, echoing Jesus. “The thing the church needs most today,” Francis said, “is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; ... I see the church as a field hospital after battle.” Yes, the church is a hospital filled with wounded sinners, and because she is Christ’s church, she is called to offer sinners the healing medicine of Christ, the great Physician of souls. She is called to dispense the forgiveness of sins.

Dear saints, that’s what the church is about — unlike what that so-called “Gospel preacher” was proclaiming last week outside our fence! He tried to tell you that your salvation is your doing ... you deciding to follow Jesus (that’s his definition of “being born again” (John 3:3)). True discipleship is not measured by the righteous things you do, but by humbly receiving what Christ and His church offers to you as a sinner: the forgiveness of sins. That’s what all her sacred acts revolve around: baptisms like with Bishop recently — sins washed away, a sinner

¹ “A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis,” Antonio Spadaro, S.J., September 30, 2013, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis

brought to Jesus; absolution to all of us today, and for those who are troubled in their hearts by a particular sin, individual absolution — that's forgiveness for sinners and restoration and peace with God; the Holy Communion, the supper that offers up the body that Jesus sacrificed for us once on the cross, and serves us the blood poured out from His head and hands and feet and side, and with it forgiveness for sinners — the forgiveness that He won for you on the cross comes to you today in this supper.

And that sinners might receive this great medicine, Christ has given His church another gift. He called "*apostles [like Matthew] and prophets [like Ezekiel], evangelists [like Matthew again]*"; and He calls "*pastors/teachers [like me]*" into His service to equip you, to serve you, and to build you up by His gifts.

Pastors are called to dispense the medicine that Christ gives. That medicine surely comes to us in different ways just as medicine for the body does. Your doctor may give you a pill or cough syrup; he may give you a shot or prescribe a salve; he may schedule you for radiation or chemo or surgery. Similarly, Christ's medicine comes as preaching or absolution into your ears, as a pure water on your head, as a holy medicine received into your mouth — early church father Irenaeus called the Sacrament of the Altar "the medicine of immortality."

The power of this medicine for our souls, of course, is God Himself — found in the scrolls of Holy Scripture. You can read it, and are invited to do so. But this is what your pastor has been called to do: to eat the scroll — not a bitter medicine, but as sweet as honey — that he might receive the words in his heart, and hear them with his ears, and then speak them with his mouth ... not his own words, but a '*Thus says the Lord GOD*' to sinners.

Surely, that seems out of season in these latter days and many refuse to hear, but we in the church understand: we are sick, and so we need a physician. No one seeks out a doctor if he's not sick. We may grudgingly go for our annual checkup. Rather, it's when we're sick that we seek him out. Similarly, for our souls — if you say you have no sin, then you have no need for a Savior; you have no need of the forgiveness of sins (of course, you are actually just deceiving yourself). Let that not be us. Rather, let us admit it. We're sinners; we sin; and let us take our medicine: "*[i]f we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). "*[T]he blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7).

This is the first dose, just now received into your ears. But a second dose awaits. Come to Christ's table and receive it into your mouth. Eat and drink the Lord's Body and Blood, be forgiven, and live unto immortality.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.