



Reflection for September 23, 2020: Saint Matthew

“Follow me.” [Matthew 9:9]

“Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” [Luke 18:13]

We learn from the story of Matthew the lesson of *mercy*.

Tax collectors were *the* most despised people in the region. They were social outcasts not simply because of circumstances (illness, family transgressions, poverty, ethnic identity) but because they had chosen to carry out the Roman government’s unjust system of taxation. The general assumption was that they took a portion of the taxes for themselves. They represented the very embodiment of corruption, betrayal, and self-interest.

So for Jesus to say to a *tax collector* **Follow me** without expecting or demanding repentance was in itself a profound act of mercy. We do not know if Matthew was as corrupt as others assumed or whether he had tried to manipulate the system with compassion in order to ease the burden of his fellow Jews. We do not know if he took pride in his position within the Roman system or if he believed it was his only option for survival. We do not know whether he was arrogant or ashamed. We only know that he responded *without hesitation* to Jesus’ invitation. He did not try to second guess Jesus’ choice of him. He did not explain to anyone what he was doing. Matthew simply *got up and followed him*. Clearly, Jesus affirmed something in Matthew that no one else—perhaps even he himself—had glimpsed.

We learn from the calling of Matthew that mercy is not condescending. It is not a sign of weakness. It does not blink at darkness or moral complexity. Anne Lamott quotes a friend as saying: *[Mercy] is a new pair of glasses. When we put them on, we see the awful person, sometimes even ourselves, a bit more gently, and we are blessed in return.* [*Hallelujah Anyway*, p. 12]

Recognizing that the call to discipleship is an act of mercy carries particular weight this year, on the day following Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish New Year, and especially following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The encounter between Jesus and Matthew is a moving example of *tikkun olam* “repairing the world”: Central to Judaism, this is a principle that we are responsible not only for our own welfare but for the well-being of people we will never meet. As many people have said, this ethic was at the core of Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s life and work. Justice is not merely a political or legislative goal but a spiritual and moral commitment to bring about a balance in the world. According to this principle, we do not strive to *overcome* the darkness of evil but rather we strive to make room for the light of reason and wisdom.

The Gospel of Matthew differs from the other gospels in portraying Jesus as a faithful Jewish teacher, teaching how to be faithful to tradition while being open to understanding it in new ways. The mercy of Jesus is not a new Christian virtue that reflects a benevolent use of power. The call to discipleship is a call to follow Jewish principle of *tikku olam*.

O God, complete the work you have begun in me.

Release through me

A flow of mercy and gentleness that will bring

Water where there is desert,

Healing where there is hurt,

Peace where there is violence,

Beauty where there is ugliness,

Justice where there is brokenness,

Beginnings where there are dead-ends.

Ted Loder, *Waken in Me a Gratitude for My Life* [*Guerillas of Grace*, p. 82]