Paintbrush of Scripture: The Calling of St. Matthew

November 10, 2019

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

**Matthew 9:9-13**

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[Note about series –

We started in the 15th Century during the High Renaissance with the Italian painter and sculptor Michaelangelo and his iconic work, *The Creation of Adam* painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and then moved last week into the 17th Century Baroque Era, with the Dutch painter Rembrandt’s work *The Raising of Lazarus*]

Today we are actually backing up a few years, into the late 1500s/early 1600s, and we are moving from the Netherlands back to Italy again, with the Italian Painter Caravaggio.



Caravaggio was, to put it bluntly, an absolutely miserable human being, although to be fair, he didn’t have an easy childhood or young life. He was born with the name Michaelangelo Merisi in Milan, Italy in 1571. When he was 5 years old his family moved from Milan to the town of Caravaggio – and he sort-of takes on the name of that town as his own name. His family moved to escape the Bubonic Plague, or the “Black Death” that was moving its way through Europe, and then just one year later when he is six years old, his father, grandparents, and uncle all die from the plague. He and his mother manage to survive, but then eight years later, when he is 14, his mother dies as well.

That is about the time that Caravaggio throws himself into his artwork. At the young age of 14 Caravaggio is apprenticed to a painter near his birthplace of Milan, and then later flees from Milan to Rome after he got into a fight and a police officer was wounded. Evidently, Caravaggio had crazy anger issues that would follow him his whole life.

So, he arrives in Rome without a penny to his name, no food, no clothes, no place to live, and is taken in by a miserly old man and gets a job painting flowers and fruit for a local painter, before he gets deathly sick and is forced to leave his job. He spends several years scrapping together odd jobs here and there, getting commissioned to paint something from time to time, building relationships with area artists, but the descriptions of him during that time are really not very flattering. One person recounts that “after a fortnight’s work he will swagger about for a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him, from one ball-court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or an argument, so that it is most awkward to get along with him.” In 1606 he got into a brawl, most likely over a gambling debt, and wound up killing a young man, and was sentenced to death, which led him to flee from Rome, and landed in Naples. During the next couple of years he landed some awesome jobs and painted some of his most famous works – he was so successful that he had hoped that he might be able to petition the Pope for a pardon for killing the young man back in Rome. At one point he was even knighted. But, all of this came to a crashing halt when he got into yet another brawl, this time with a fellow knight who wound up seriously wounded. He was imprisoned, and yet again, he managed to escape and fled to Sicily. Are you noticing a common theme here?

The next year, in 1609 he was involved in a violent attack, an attempt on his life, which left his face permanently disfigured. And then the following year, he gets good news: there is a possibility that the Pope will grant him a pardon, in exchange for several pieces of art. Unfortunately, he would never receive this pardon, as he died on a boat on his way to Rome. To this day, nobody knows exactly how he died, although there are a lot of theories and rumors out there. Letters at the time say that he died from a fever – possibly syphilis, or malaria. Some historians think that he was attacked and killed by the knights of which he had formerly been a part. DNA tests performed on his remains suggest that he probably suffered from lead poisoning, which would have explained his violent behavior throughout his life, and may have led to his death. And other tests suggest that he was wounded in yet another brawl in Naples, and he got an infection and died of sepsis.

In the end nobody knows. He died much like he had lived – under a shroud of confusion and messiness, at only 39 years old.

But despite his messy life, and his violent and erratic behavior, and his inability to stick around one place for more than a couple of years, and despite the enemies that he made and the people that he hurt along the way, he still goes down in history as one of “the greats.”

It may be partly due to his rough life, and the pain that he had experienced, and the pain that he had caused, that he was able to place himself in the stories and lives of the very real people and circumstances in scripture and bring them to life. He didn’t shy away from dark and painful stories – probably his most famous painting of all was the beheading of John the Baptist. One of his superpowers as an artist was capturing raw emotion and psychological depth in his paintings.



In his painting of the Calling of St. Matthew, which was maybe the painting that first jump-started his career as an artist, we have depicted a scene, likely in a bar or a pub or a first-century gathering place. Five young men, all dressed in fancy clothes, are gathered around a table. The man with his back to us is armed, with his sword ready to go. The man on the far left is carefully and intently examining a pile of coins, his head down, determinedly not looking at what is happening off to the right of the picture. It looks like another man is standing over this young man’s shoulder, helping him, almost like he’s fascinated by a problem that the two of them are trying to figure out together. The bearded man in the center of the table is Matthew, the Tax Collector, looking startled and pointing to himself, and the man beside him is presumably his happy-go-lucky friend who is curious and uncertain.

On your cards the right-hand side of the picture is unfortunately cut off, so we can’t see the rest of the drama, and that’s unfortunate – my mistake – I didn’t pull the full version off the computer so you are going to have to use your imaginations a little bit with me.

We see the light shining in from the right, illuminating the tax collectors’ table, shining directly on those five men, illuminating everything about them. Their activity, their expressions, their emotions, their surprise, their preoccupations. Every piece of who they are is caught up in this beam of light that shines in from outside. But under this light, slightly illuminated but more cast in shadow are two men, dressed in plain clothes. Not nearly the high class and fancy regalia of these tax collectors. One of these plainly clothed men has his back turned away from us as he is looking toward Matthew and pointing at him. The other man is partially blocked by the first one, but we can see his face, and his eyes locked in a fixed gaze upon Matthew. And his arm is stretched out as far as it can go, interestingly, with his hand in the very same outstretched hand position that Michaelangelo had painted in the *Creation of Adam* 200 years before.

This man reaching out his arm doesn’t look much like most depictions of Jesus that we might see. He isn’t gentle. His jaw is set. You can see the tendons and muscles in his neck, almost craned in intensity. You can see in his face that THIS is important. He MUST catch this man Matthew’s attention.

And what’s astonishing is that he does it. If, under normal circumstances, two underdressed commoners were to approach a table of five armed and wealthy tax collectors, they would probably either get laughed out of the room, or the sword would get pulled on them, or they would be met with eye rolls and not a lot of attention. Tax collectors did whatever they wanted and they didn’t pay a lot of mind to the commoners who were getting stiffed. They’d usually just threaten them and then use them to line their own pockets. But here, the man with the sword doesn’t have his hand on his sword. There is something about what this Jesus is saying that is interesting, and nonthreatening to him. He wants to hear him out, and see how this whole thing is going to go down. The man with the coins apparently looks like he doesn’t want Jesus to meet *his* gaze. He is looking so intently at his fingers, at the table, like a group of high school students who don’t want to be called on, almost like he feels guilty about something and just doesn’t want to be seen or exposed. And then there’s Matthew. Pointing to himself, as if to say, “Me?” His gaze is fixed on Jesus. He’s startled. Stunned. Like somebody really important has just approached *him*, of all people, and he can’t believe that this really important person even knows his name, much less wants him to come and follow him.

It’s a fascinating picture. We have this powerful group of five wealthy men – the ones who should have been the powerful ones in the picture, suddenly looking startled and vulnerable and exposed and confused when the light shines on them and when two people without power or wealth or anything else show up and point at them. And then we see, bridging the gap between these two groups – bridging the space between the tax collectors and the place where Jesus and what appears to be one of his other disciples is standing, bridging this space is the hand of Jesus, formed in exactly the same image as Michaelangelo’s hand of God, reaching across this gap, to summon Matthew.

It’s almost as if he’s saying, this divide between rich and poor, between saint and sinner, between light and darkness, between you and me, this divide is enormous. It’s every bit as big as reaching across time and space to reach from heaven to earth and breathe the divine spark of life into Adam in the beginning. This gap is wide, and dark, and real. This gap between people, between tax collector and commoner, between the powerful and those without power, between the haves and the have nots, this divide across ideological barriers and the barriers that people put up between people, this divide is so wide and so dark that there might as well be a vast universe between us.

But I have come to bridge that gap. To reach across the divide. And to call you. So Matthew, come. And follow me.

And when we read the story, we see that that is exactly what Matthew does. He gets up. and he follows Jesus. But it isn’t just Matthew who follows him. Matthew might be the one who ultimately gives up everything to become one of Jesus’ 12 closest followers, but at least some of these other tax collectors – they are interested, too. They are ready to get up from that table and follow the summons as well.

And we see that in the very next verse, the scene has shifted to dinnertime, and for whatever reason, it seems like there are a lot of people here for dinner. Jesus. and his disciples, and the Pharisees, and the Tax collectors. These are three major groups of people who wouldn’t ordinarily all get invited to the same dinner party. Maybe it’s just one big community block party, where everybody is invited. Or maybe the Pharisees decided to host Jesus for a nice, quiet get-together, and Jesus asked them if he could invite a couple of friends, and he ended up coming with half the town.

So why they are all having dinner together is anybody’s guess. But they are, and Jesus is sitting with the disciples, and there at the table with the disciples is this group of tax collectors that Jesus has met earlier in the day. But this time, their faces aren’t faces of shock and surprise and guilt and fear. They aren’t looking nearly as exposed or vulnerable. They’re laughing, and sharing stories, and having a great time, and feeling totally at-ease with Jesus, and the Pharisees *hate this*. There is *nothing* about this scene that is okay. They had invited Jesus to come talk about how to restore order and discipline and a sense of holy reverence to life, and here Jesus is cutting up with the epitome of everything that is wrong with society. For the Pharisees, Jesus may have stepped across that gap; bridged that divide between one group of people and the next, but the Pharisees wanted that gap to be wider. They wanted nothing to do with these lawless low-lives. For them, it was either-or. Either Jesus was with them, or he was against them. He couldn’t love people on both sides.

Friends, I love this painting, for so many reasons.

* I love that it shows us that when the light of Christ shines on us, there is really no place we can hide. Everything about us is brought into the light, and it’s there, when we are caught surprised and unaware, standing before Jesus just as we are, that Jesus can reach across those vast, cavernous spaces that we set up between ourselves and God, and call us home.
* I love the cosmic reversal that we see here in the picture. In this picture, it’s not the powerful people who are ultimately the ones with the power. It’s Jesus, who is presented here not as a king or a cosmic being with a halo around his head, but as an everyday person.
* I love that here, God shows up in the ordinary, and the ordinary is enough to capture the attention of everybody in the room.
* And I love thinking that maybe, just maybe, as broken as Caravaggio was as a person; as miserable a human being as he turned out to be; as many enemies as he made and as many times as he was forced to flee from one town to another, that maybe he felt like he had a little something in common with these tax collectors. These dregs of society who were hated by just about everybody. And I like to think that maybe when he painted that hand of God reaching across the darkness to call out to Matthew, that maybe, he found Jesus calling out to himself as well.



Friends, I’m pretty sure that most of us probably don’t have a rap sheet nearly as long as Caravaggio’s. But like Caravaggio, and like the tax collectors in this painting, and like the Pharisees who always loved to point out everything that Jesus was doing wrong, we all have those spaces within us that, on some level, we fear to have illuminated. Thoughts that we don’t ever want brought to the light, skeletons in our closets, messiness in our family histories that we’d rather not revisit, or memories of stupid things that we did a long time ago that we would rather forget about; bridges that we have burned; pains that we have caused; guilts and grudges that we still bear; habits that we seem not to be able to shake; pieces of ourselves that we would like to just put in a box up on the shelf and not deal with.

The bad news is that when Jesus walks into the room and calls out to us, and reaches out his hand to us, it means that we will have to deal with some of these things. These things that we keep in the dark and ignore and forget about, the light of Christ has to shine on these pieces of us before God can begin to heal these parts of us. But the good news is that God invites us to the party, and sits with us and laughs with us, and speaks to us, knowing fully well our darkest sides, but speaking words of life and hope and healing into these very spaces so that we too can come to know the power and love of the risen Christ.