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“Follow Me”

Text: Matthew 9:9-13 (Ephesians 4:7-16; Ezekiel 2:8-3:11)

12 years ago this day, no one (except a handful of terrorists) woke up on that beautiful, crisp morning expecting jets to be used as bombs, almost 3,000 people to lose their lives, two iconic buildings to be reduced to a great pile of rubble, and a third to be badly damaged. By the end of the day the world had changed.

So it was also for a man named Levi. When he awoke that morning, he went to his tax office, like usual; he saw the same faces, like usual; and he began collecting taxes, like usual. But by the end of the day, his world had changed for him. Because not a terrorist, but a Saviour, came crashing into his life. That day, Levi became Matthew, and a tax collector became an apostle and evangelist. Because Jesus came to him and said, “***Follow Me.***”

That’s what the firefighters and rescue personnel said that day 12 years ago also. *Follow me.* In response to the disaster, these people did what they had been trained to do and sent to do. They rushed into the burning buildings and found the people in danger, the people in smoke-filled rooms, the people disoriented by what had just happened, and said: *follow me.* Many of those first responders didn’t make it. But they saved a good many people that day as well, and were hailed as heroes.

Jesus, however, was not hailed as a hero by the Pharisees. Quite the opposite - He was criticized. The Son of God was sent into this world burning with sin, but the Pharisees didn’t rejoice in Him, but instead wondered: ***Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*** The answer, as you heard, was: ***Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*** Or, we could say: those who are not trapped in burning and collapsing buildings have no need of a firefighter to rescue them, but those who are do. And those who are filled with joy when they are found and hear those wonderful words: *follow me.*

And so Matthew’s joy when Jesus found him that day. Until this time he knew only of *taking*. Of a government *taking* taxes, and of his *taking* taxes from the people. And for doing his job he was disliked at best, and ostracized at worst. As a tax collector, he was lumped together with the great and obvious sinners of the world and considered no better than they. *The tax collectors and sinners*, they sneered at him. How would that make you feel? Maybe you know. Maybe you’ve been sneered at and rejected like that.

But Jesus says no such thing. The one who came to rescue does what He is sent to do. And He doesn’t *take*, He *gives*. Freely. In Matthew’s taking world, he wasn’t used to that! But how wonderful it was. Jesus giving honor and love. Jesus giving forgiveness not

criticism. Jesus building up and not tearing down. And for this Jesus would lose His life, the sin and death of our burning world collapsing down on Him. But even in this Jesus is giving, for this was no accident or unforeseen event. Jesus came to give His life for us. To lay down His life for us. To trade places with us, that He be captive and we be free. That you be free.

Which is why the Pharisees weren't rejoicing - they thought they were free. They didn't realize they too were caught in a burning building on the verge of collapse and in need of rescue. And if you don't know that, then when a firefighter shows up on your floor or at your door and says "follow me," you look at him like he's crazy. And so they looked at Jesus in that way - the crazy man who hangs out with tax collectors and sinners.

That's why God sent *prophets* like Ezekiel, to speak to the people the danger they were in, the danger of their sin and idolatry, and to point them to their rescue. That's why God gave the *apostles and evangelists* like Matthew, to go into all the world and not only proclaim this truth, but also proclaim the Saviour who has come to rescue us, and to write it for all the generations to come. And it's why our Lord still today gives *shepherds* (or pastors) *and teachers* - that you know too. And that Matthew's joy be your joy, and Matthew's rescue be your rescue.

For that's what Jesus was sent to do. To go everywhere and rescue everyone. And so He goes to the manger - to be one with us beginning even in infancy. He goes to Jews and Gentiles, men and women. He goes to tax collectors and sinners. He goes to lepers and outcasts. He goes to the Temple, to synagogues, and to houses. And finally He goes to cross and grave and hell. And on the third day, He came out of the rubble alive. With the promise that all who belong to Him, all who are baptized, all who believe in Him, will do the same. No matter how great the rubble of your life. No matter how great the sin. No matter how hopeless things may seem. He did it, He promised, and so you can be sure.

And then there's one more thing: He ascended into heaven. That's for you too. For you know what Jesus is doing there? *Eating with tax collectors and sinners!* For heaven is populated entirely by forgiven sinners, the sick who have received the healing medicine of forgiveness. So there's a seat for you and me. Just as we come to our Lord's Table now in Holy Communion, so He will seat us at His Table forever in the feast that has no end.

The tragedies that occurred twelve years ago left a scar on our country and on many people. The cross left scars on Jesus too. Those piles of rubble that were a result of that day have since been cleaned up, and gleaming new and repaired buildings raised. Jesus was resurrected too - glorious *forever*. For while we cannot be sure that another 9-11 will not happen, we can be sure that Jesus' death will not happen again. For Jesus defeated sin, defeated death, defeated the grave, and defeated the foe - and is victorious and glorious forever. And in Him, that's for us too. For Ezekiel, for Paul, for Matthew, and

for you.

And so Matthew *rose and followed Him*. So will you and I, on the last day, when Jesus comes again in all His glory and with all His angels. The trumpet will sound, we will arise alive from the rubble of death and the grave, and follow Him . . . to heaven.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.