

## *God's Desire*

Time after Pentecost - Affirmation of Baptism  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Hosea 5:15 - 6:6; Psalm 50:7-15;  
Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Early in 1785, an English politician by the name of William Wilberforce read a book. The book was called The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul. At the same time, that same politician came across some church services. (They weren't the Lutheran sort of services that are very formal; they were much more sort of loosey-goosey types of services.) But this politician began to see a new way of living. He began to understand that he was being called to be a new type of person and that not only was he going to be able to do that, but he was going to have the power to do it. Which is, of course, exactly what is before you, as confirmands, this morning. The question is, are you ready for it? In a few minutes you will take for yourselves the baptismal promises made for you by your parents when you were baptized. And what is actually happening is a life changing event – if you will allow it to be so. It is a divine invitation to a new way of living that will change you and everything around you.

Just like Matthew, sitting at his tax booth and hearing Jesus say, "Follow me." and Matthew did. And his life was changed forever. He hadn't read any books. He was just sitting at his tax booth, collecting taxes, and when Jesus said, "Follow me", that's what Matthew did. It changed his life. But for Matthew, following Jesus was a major problem. The other people around him wouldn't believe, and some of the people around him refused to understand. You see, in Jesus' day, this stuff wasn't to happen to tax collectors; they were people who collaborated with the Roman government, and they were both feared and hated people. They were private contractors whose job was simply to collect the taxes for the Romans. But there was a perk: they could add as much to the tax bill as they liked for themselves; and so lots of them became fat and rich and very wealthy.

So what's Jesus up to, calling someone like this? Certainly not what the Pharisees thought he should be doing! And things only got worse at dinner time that day. Because Jesus sat down to dinner not only with Matthew, but with a host of other tax collectors and a group of sinners. Just think for a minute – I wonder what sort of people they were. I pretty much bet they were the sort of people that everyone else in town was able to point to and say they were sinners because . . . The Pharisees were appalled, and they went and complained to Jesus' disciples that He was going with the wrong crowd and eating with sinners, something that was forbidden in the Jewish laws.

But Jesus sees beyond the laws and rules to something much deeper, to the very real need that every human being has and which is of great concern to God. Jesus was about transforming people, turning them into the people they never believed they could actually be. And healing people. And setting them free to be renewed people of God. So when the disciples told Him

about the Pharisees' complaints, Jesus explained to them that He was merely like a doctor, and his job in the world was to come to people who needed healing, to cure their ills – the shunned, the ostracized, the ignored, the people nobody had time for.

William Wilberforce suffered a similar misunderstanding. You see, when he became a Christian he didn't make any secret about it; he told people what he was and the change that had made in his life. And the result was . . . well, people distrusted him and they frowned upon him and they thought that religious people like him were extreme and unreliable. But Wilberforce knew what Jesus was asking him to do, and he set about trying to be the best he could as a politician, as a parliamentarian, and as a law maker. He could have made a whole lot of laws that told people what to do and how to behave and the right way to do it, but that was the wrong way to go. Instead, Wilberforce wanted to look to people who were somehow trapped in their lives, or oppressed, and he wanted to find ways of changing society so that people could be free and empowered to live good, healthy lives. So he set about starting a whole lot of reforms in Parliament. And guess what? He met enormous opposition.

So in the end, what do you think he felt? Do you think he might have felt like giving up? What do you say, guys? Of course he felt like giving up! It was just too much and he wasn't getting anywhere. But before he gave up, he stopped by to see an Anglican minister he knew about. The minister's name was John Newton. Do you know who John Newton was? You're nodding, Nate, who was he? He wrote Amazing Grace, right on, top of the class dude! Newton spoke with Wilberforce and told Wilberforce not to give up; it's not about giving up, it's not about winning, it's about being truly who you are, and you should be in Parliament, he told him, because you're going to make a world of difference if you stay here.

So Wilberforce began to set about ending the slave trade and setting slaves free. It was a next to impossible task. He kept introducing legislation over and over and over again. And he kept losing and losing and losing again. But he never gave up and he kept on trying for 29 years. Finally in 1807, the British Parliament abolished the slave trade. And in 1825, William Wilberforce resigned. He was in ill health and in some financial distress, and he still hadn't seen slaves being set free, even though the trade had been stopped. But on the 26th of July 1833, eight years he resigned, the British government acted to emancipate, or set free the slaves. And three days after that, William Wilberforce died.

We know very little about Matthew, other than the fact that he lived and worked as one of the disciples and that the Church in its wisdom decided to give his name to this particular gospel. But you see, the important thing is that both Matthew and William Wilberforce took to heart what they had learned from Jesus and did what God desired, they became people who lived and breathed mercy. That's the request made of you when you were baptized, and it is the request made of you now that you affirm your baptism, and it is the request made of me and of every baptized person in this room and of all the baptized people elsewhere. It is the hallmark of those who really believe and truly follow Jesus: being merciful. And to make sure that we understand it, the gospel immediately goes to two stories, one of man and the other of a woman in need, who come to Jesus for help. The leader of the synagogue has lost his daughter to death, and a woman in the crowd has suffered from a hemorrhaging for twelve years. Jesus and his disciples follow the desperate, grief-stricken man to his home, and in the crowd following, the woman reaches to

touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak, believing she will be made whole. She is healed as Jesus honors her faith. When Jesus arrives at the man's house, the flute players and the professional mourners are already there, but he sends them away, even though they laugh at him, and going in, takes the girl's hand and heals her.

Unless we understand the ancient Jewish laws in effect at the time, we can miss what's important. Men shouldn't be speaking to women in public, and women should definitely not be touching men, especially when they are hemorrhaging. But what happens? She speaks to Jesus, she touches him, He speaks to her, and she's healed! And all the rules have gone out the window. Jesus, you see, declares life instead of death. His healing of the synagogue leader's daughter also breaks the rules. There he is, crossing boundaries that he has no business crossing. The bottom line is simply this: it's the story of changing peoples' lives in response to the mercy of God in Jesus.

Whether in the call to a disciple, or in response to deep human need, Jesus extends God's love like a Great Physician. He breaks all convention and reaches across all sorts of barriers, for Him there are no such things. And He touches people with mercy and grace. But you know what, that's exactly how he has touched the lives of everyone in this room, you and I included. He takes us just as we are, with all our faults and failures, with our sins and shame, with our fears and prejudices, and with divine mercy He forgives us, He renews us and restores us into relationship with Him and with one another.

So confirmands, come and join us at the table, share with us the bread and wine, receive God's forgiveness, and find yourselves transformed into men and women of God. Come up here and take your baptismal vows for yourself and receive the wonderful blessings of God and have the Holy Spirit that's already part of you stirred up in you into a new life. Who knows exactly what sort of Matthew's and William Wilberforce's you will be. But through you if you will let Him, Christ will change both you and the world in which you live. We welcome you as fellow Christians; we welcome you as fellow disciples, as instruments of God's grace and channels of His love, and deliverers of God's mercy in a world that so desperately needs all those gifts.

Amen.