

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 21, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 9:9-13; Augsburg Confession, Articles V & XIV

“Back to Basics – What is the Office of the Ministry?”

The world is not the same as it was last week. In the past seven days, we've seen several of the leading financial institutions in this country come tumbling down in bankruptcy and government bailouts. Investment firms and insurance corporations which once helped to make it possible for people to buy more than their credit ultimately would allow are suddenly suffering the consequences – and people all around the country along with them. This week finds families wondering about their own financial situation, and seniors concerned about the security of the retirement funds they'd worked a lifetime to save.

The world is not the same as it was last month. Summer is giving way to Fall, and the weather around us is changing. Kids are getting adjusted to their new classes and teachers and the homework and pressures that come along with heading back to school. Families are finding their footing with the schedule changes that have to be made for sports practices and planning meetings and Confirmation classes. Even the commute home is changing as the days grow shorter: Monday, in fact, marks the autumnal equinox.

The world is not the same as it was last year. People that we've known and loved are no longer with us. New friends in Christ have joined our fellowship at St. John's, while other families have relocated out of the area. A number of members of our congregation have been called to rest in Christ, and many of our families have been touched by death or hardship. Some relationships have broken up or just faded away, even those that we thought might last forever.

Confronted with a world that just keeps on changing – no matter how much we'd like the *status* to just stay *quo* – we look for things that will give us a sense of stability. You might find that relationships with other people have helped you there; yet people come and go. Schedules might help you to cope; however, the unscheduled breaks in and makes a mess of things. Or maybe financial security and material wealth are your tools for getting along in a changing world, like Matthew.

Matthew, who would become one of the Twelve Apostles and the writer of today's Gospel reading, one of Jesus' closest disciples, was a tax collector. Although we don't know all the details of what that profession entailed in that region called Galilee, we do know that it was often subject to corruption and abuse of authority. The tax collectors, rather than charging the people for only the Roman-imposed tax, would overcharge so as to collect a tidy profit to pocket for themselves. Suffice to say, Matthew's countrymen had far less love for tax collectors than some Americans have for the I.R.S. today!

But in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus calls Matthew right out of the midst of his life as a tax collector: out of his life of dishonest gain, out of his life of chasing after stability through money and the things of the world. Jesus called Matthew to follow him. Jesus called Matthew into a life of service to God's people, a life of bringing people to the Savior.

Jesus' call comes to us today through the work of the Holy Spirit, through the instruments of Word and Sacrament. As we go “Back to Basics” this weekend, we're taking on the question of “What is the Office of the Ministry?” and looking at how this Office is linked to God's means of grace in an uncertain world. Before we go much deeper, let's take a moment to define some terms. When you hear “the Office of the Ministry,” a number of things might come to mind – but what is its proper meaning? Frankly, we here at St. John's probably have contributed to some confusion of terms. According to our operational structure, we've called the different areas of our Church Council's work “ministries.” As such, the elected members of the Council are called “Minister of Administration” or “Minister of Congregational Care.” As Lutherans, we embrace the Scriptural teaching of the priesthood of the baptized, the ministry of all believers who are called to share the love of Jesus in a changing world. But when we're talking about “the Office of the Ministry” in this context, we're referring specifically to the **Office of the Public**

Ministry, the Pastoral Office: that of the pastor. Given the definition of the term in its context, then, what is the Office of the Ministry? Why do we have pastors?

The world is not the same as it was 500 years ago, when the writers of the Augsburg Confession pointed to God's Word as the sole source and norm of Christian teaching – and yet the value of this document endures, because it is anchored in that Word. As such, Articles V and XIV of the Augsburg Confession can help us to better understand both the origin of the Office of the Ministry and its existence and purpose in our lives today. In these two brief statements, the Reformers express that God works through means. We can't manipulate the Holy Spirit, as some seek to do in pursuing mystical experiences or monastic isolation – He works through the tools He has claimed as His own. The Office of the Ministry was instituted by Christ for the teaching of His Gospel and the administration of His Sacraments, those instruments by which God builds and strengthens faith. Furthermore, they teach that no one should publicly teach in the church or administer the Sacraments without a formal, public, official call from the Church to do so.

The primary role of a pastor – the reason for the Office of the Ministry – is to be God's deliveryman. The Holy Spirit works through the pastor to bring God's gifts to His people and to bring God's people to Jesus' cross. This isn't a one-time delivery, but an ongoing connection. In our changing world, we're tempted every day to look to something besides Jesus for **stability**. And every day, God keeps giving His gifts **to strengthen our faith** and to draw us closer to Himself, **to transform our lives**.

You might not have had the occasion to think about what's involved in the Office of the Ministry. You probably *are* aware that the pastor leads the service and preaches a sermon when we gather for worship. Those are two of the most visible ways in which he exercises the duties of his office; however, the pastor, to be faithful to the teaching which has been entrusted to him, continually calls our attention back to Christ as our sole hope. **The pastor has been called to be an instrument of God's care for us.** The pastor is here for you as God's people in a changing world. He brings the message of comfort and assurance that God in Christ alone can give us, even as we struggle with our questions and fears. That's what for the parents of the child awaiting surgery at the hospital. That's what happens for those present at the funeral or graveside committal of our beloved in the faith who have died. That's what happens for the couple preparing for marriage or for the hurt individual seeking direction. And sometimes, in order to be that instrument of God's care for us, the pastor may have to clearly speak what the people don't want to hear.

The pastor is a member of the congregation: he is neither a hired hand nor a C.E.O. As the one who has been called by God through the Church, the priesthood of believers in a congregation, the pastor represents the people before God as we worship. He is also a servant-leader among God's people, held to a high standard as one who has been entrusted with great responsibility in serving as a public teacher of God's Word. Scripture lays out a number of qualifications and expectations for those who aspire to the Office of the Ministry. So we believe that for the good order of the Church, no one should take up the Pastoral Office without a call through the Church in a local congregation. The "inner call" to ministry which someone might feel must be validated by the "outer call" through public examination and affirmation, then ordination into service as a pastor. That means that someone shouldn't just go out and start being a pastor just because they felt like it.

The Office of the Ministry is given through calling. When Jesus called Matthew, it wasn't due to Matthew's holiness; rather, the call came because of God's grace. The men who serve as pastors are not more holy than other Christians. We pastors, like Matthew, need the forgiveness of sin that God freely gives in Jesus' cross and the hope of the empty tomb. Christ calls through His Church, and we follow.

The world is not the same as it used to be. But our unchanging, loving God is unceasingly at work to call us back to Himself, giving His gifts through the Office of the Ministry, pointing us to Jesus, our Rock and our certain hope.

Amen.