***June 11, 2023 Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26***

***Grace***

**Scripture:** Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 NRSV

*(9)As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (10)And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. (11)When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (12)But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (13)Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners… (18)While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." (19)And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. (20)Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, (21)for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." (22)Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. (23)When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, (24)he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. (25)But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. (26)And the report of this spread throughout that district*.

**Notes:**

1. The grace of God changes people. This process is ***conversion***.
   1. God’s grace ***turns*** us around.
   2. For some people this process is very ***quick***.
   3. Sometimes the move is very ***slow***.
   4. We were looking in one direction but now we are looking in the opposite.
2. God’s grace ***invades*** and ***transforms*** from a child of hate into a child of love.
   1. Grace comes from ***unexpected*** directions.
   2. Grace transforms us into a child that ***exemplifies*** our Father in heaven.
3. Matthew was ***despised*** by the community in which he lived.
   1. Grace enters Matthew’s life in the person of ***Jesus***.
   2. Unaware, Matthew ***follows*** Jesus.
   3. “*Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.”* *Matthew 25:31-46*
4. Look ***close*** to see God’s grace in your life.
   1. How is grace ***appearing*** in your life?
   2. ***Welcome*** grace when it comes.
   3. ***Give*** ***thanks*** whenever grace breaks into your life

**Script:**

Have you ever been given something for absolutely no logical reason? I remember receiving things from people for no other reason other than they liked me. Friends in elementary school gave me items from their lunch because they didn’t want them. As a teenager receiving items. One such item was this orange Cannondale insulated vest. I heard of such items and during my teenage years I never entertained the idea of having one because I heard they were out of my price range. Yet one day a gentleman knocked at my house door and offers the vest to me, no conditions, no quid pro quo, no expectations; the man just wanted to give me this vest. I took that vest and used it for more than 8 years until it wore out to the point that it was nothing more than a filthy rag.

In many ways that is the definition of grace. Webster states that grace is, “unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification; a virtue coming from God; a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine assistance. In other words, it is something given to us with no expectations and no conditions. Have you ever received such grace? And what effect does grace have on people?

Today I would like to share with you a couple stories about how people are changed by acts of grace. We will look at our gospel passage found in Matthew 9:9-13 and 18-26. Stand with me and turn in your bibles to this passage as we share in the reading of God’s Word.

*(9)As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (10)And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. (11)When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (12)But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (13)Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners… (18)While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." (19)And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. (20)Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, (21)for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." (22)Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. (23)When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, (24)he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. (25)But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. (26)And the report of this spread throughout that district*. *Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 NRSV*

The grace of God changes people. We call this process conversion. We are converted from the person we once was, to who we now are. The word conversion means simply “to turn around.” Ironically that is the same meaning we use for the word repent. When we repent we turn from our sinful ways towards the God who saves us. God’s grace turns us around. For some people this process is very quick. They see the error in their ways and turn from those ways and are determined to never return to them. But sometimes the move is very slow, so much so that you hardly are able to notice the change in who you are.

But in all cases, conversion, the process by which God’s grace changes us, means that once we were looking in one direction but now we are looking in the opposite. When conversion happens, we find ourselves looking in the direction we had once turned our back upon. We have also turned our back upon the direction we once looked. It’s a simple turn around, from one way to another. In the first season of *The Chosen,* when asked about the change in her life, Mary Magdalene states “All I know is that I was one way, and now I am another.” The only thing that happened in the middle was Jesus.

There are several kinds of change, or conversion, in a Christian life. Each of them are important in their own right. And, every one of them is connected. They happen in a unique order and way in every person. And the process is never quite finished; we are a work in progress. God’s grace keeps changing people–or at least trying to do so–because to build on a familiar saying, God isn’t finished with any of us yet.

The first story I would like to share with you I read this past week and really stuck with me. It is about a man who died by execution in 1998. His name was Hank Hayes. Hank’s life got off to a pretty ugly start. He was raised in the deep south filled with hatred. Hank’s father was a Klansman.; not just any Klansman but the imperial wizard of the klan. Hank bought into all the propaganda and hatred and joined the klan himself.

So when a black man was lynched in Mobile, Hank was a likely suspect. He was eventually convicted in a high profile murder case. The primary witness was a man who gave testimony on the heels of a plea deal. It was later learned that he lied and perjured himself on the stand. The jury set the sentence to life without parole, but the judge overruled the jury and sentenced Hank to death. The governor refused to intervene even after a different witness came forward admitting that Hank was with him when the murder was to have occurred. SO after seven long years with appeals on death row. The state of Alabama sent Hank to his punishment.

My message today is not about the pros and cons of the death penalty. Rather, than talk about Hank’s death, today I want to talk about how Hank lived after his sentencing. I want to talk about how God’s grace invaded the life of a convicted Klansman and changed him, and transformed him from a child of hate into a child of love. Hank had every right to be angry, but instead, he reached into the depths of his soul and gave it all to Jesus.

Grace came at Hank Hayes from several unexpected directions. When he first arrived on death row, he and the guards were worried about how black inmates would react to him. But two of the black leaders escorted him around. “The state’s trying to kill us all,” said one of them, “We haven’t got time to hate.”

During his time in prison, Hank was adopted by an English congregation. He grew to love them very much and they grew to love Hank. After considerable consideration and contemplation; he decided to join the Episcopal church. It was difficult to get the training needed to join the church but God made a way with some very determined individuals.

Many prisoners become adept at conning people, even chaplains and prison officials. But Hank’s conversion was no con job. Grace was real in his life, and it was real at the moment of his death. When the final day came, and they strapped him into the electric chair, the warden asked him if he had any last words. I wonder what any one of us, who would find ourselves in a similar situation, would say. Would our anger and frustration overcome us, would we just weep in sorrow; or would we be like Hank? Hank's final opportunity to speak was moving. He looked at the executioners, he looked to the families of the victims, and he looked to his friends and simply said I love you to each of them. Hank simply smiled and spoke a word of grace. Grace had transformed Hank into a child that exemplified his Father in heaven.

Was Hank Hayes converted to God and to Christ? Was he converted to the church, the community of Christ? Was he converted to the world, a world full of black and white prisoners, chaplains and executioners? The answer in every instance is yes. Hank Hayes was once a pretty nasty customer, someone many found it easy to dismiss; some may even think him deserving of his punishment. So too was the other person I want to tell you about: a man named Matthew.

Matthew was despised by the community in which he lived. He was viewed as a traitor and conspirator against the Jewish people because of his position as a tax collector. Matthew was a living reminder of the heavy burden of taxation placed upon the people by the Roman government. As a whole, tax collectors were considered cheats and lost souls.

Then one day, as Matthew is working away in his office, grace enters his life in the person of Jesus. Jesus doesn’t ignore or condemn him, or otherwise treat him as he was accustomed to be treated by so many others. What Jesus does is invite him. “Follow me,” is what Jesus says. Not just an invitation to hear what he has to say, but an invitation to be his disciple. Matthew is astounded, yet he knows a good deal when he hears one, so he leaves the tax office behind and follows Jesus, hardly stopping to lock the door behind him.

Unaware of what he’s getting himself into, Matthew follows Jesus. He experiences grace. His conversion begins as he turns his back on sordid rip-offs and follows someone who gives him all he needs for free. Matthew follows Jesus, and follows him, and follows him. He walks with him along dusty roads, and, through the events of Holy Week. Yet Jesus still calls, and Matthew follows.

Grace was in the air, even stronger than before. Matthew was witness to the resurrection. He is responsible for the Gospel that bears his name. It’s been said that of the four Gospels, Matthew has been the most influential throughout the Church’s history. Jesus calls, and still Matthew follows. It is written and rumored that Matthew was a martyr, He was a man led by grace to offer his life in the cause of Christ.

Once known as a cheat, collaborator, greedy, shameful. That’s how people saw Matthew as he took in money dishonestly, unjustly, there in his little office. But one day grace knocked on his door, and he turned his back to the world and turned his face to Jesus; he was converted, turned around. The change was manifold. Converted to God, the Lord of mercy. Converted to Jesus, who loves the unworthy. Converted to the church, those early Christians. And even converted to the world, for Matthew, the sometime cheat, whose heart was once as hard as silver coins, records that Jesus story where the King on judgment day announces: “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.” Matthew 25:31-46

Death row in Alabama. The office of a dishonest collaborator. Unlikely places for scenes of grace. But grace happens there to people like Hank Hayes and that man named Matthew. If grace touches characters like them, can the rest of us be immune?

How is grace appearing in your life? Consider your conversion to God; to Christ; to the church, the community at once sinful yet redeemed; and to the world, the world for which Christ died. In what ways are you being turned around, spun at top speed perhaps, or moved slowly, yet in the right direction?

Welcome grace when it comes. Welcome it when it shows itself in the chaos of this world. Welcome it when it drifts in ever so slowly. Look for grace to appear to you again and again in unique and different ways. Give thanks whenever grace breaks into your life.