Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

“Come, let us return to the Lord.”

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A tax collector is a peculiar thing. We rarely meet one, since in our country we never see a person when we pay our taxes. Rather, work through some program and write some check to a faceless entity called the IRS.

A tax collector is a peculiar thing, because taxes are a peculiar thing; that you should be required to pay money to a state merely because you were unfortunate enough to be born there.

Now to the well informed, one knows that taxes are necessary. They fund public works and security from criminals within and enemies without. But at the end of the day, on the most basic level, there is no denying that it feels like a racket. Someone you don’t know is demanding money from you under punishment of prison, and if you refuse, death.

In ancient times, the tax collector wasn’t merely an agency, it was a person that you had to look at face to face. A man who comes to your door, and demands money, lest he call the centurion to deal with you at the end of a sword.

Not only does he look you in the eye to require your hard-earned wages; he requires a little more, just for himself, for that is how he gets paid. You don’t know how much extra he is asking for himself. He has no duty to tell you. He merely tells you how much you owe, and you are obligated to give it to him, not knowing how much is going to the government, and how much he is keeping for himself to spend on bread and wine and oil; or if we are to be honest, prostitutes and raucous living.

Worse than this, he does not demand money to support your government, but a

foreign government; the Roman Empire, the UN of the time, except with actual power, not merely the influence of passing non-binding resolutions. The money you gave would not be spent in your own land, to improve the lives of you and your neighbors. It would be spent far away, to fund the construction of some great stone monument, or to maintain the military, the very military that oppresses you; the one the tax collector calls to put a sword to your neck when you question the amount demanded of you.

A tax collector is a peculiar thing, because, in the time of Christ, he is hellish thing, and all things infernal are strange, for they do not belong here. He is ultimately a traitor; one of your own people who extorts you to fund the ambitions of your conquerors. He is a collaborator, such as those who were either tortured or executed at the end of the Second World War for working with the National Socialists.

The Lord comes before such a traitor, this wretch named Matthew, and looks at him. He makes no explanation or introduction. He only commands. *"Follow me."*

Why does this teacher of the Jews seek out the company of seditious collaborationists?

If he were not a traitor himself, why would he share bread with traitors?

The people, the holy, that is, the Pharisees, ask exactly this. *"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

The Lord answers simply: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

The Lord indeed desires mercy. He desires nothing but for us to turn from our evil, and to look to Him, the true and only salvation. To *return to him,* Him who we left bearing our teeth as we forsook paradise in the garden to seek our own empire apart from God. He begs us to return to Him, for the most simple of reasons:

He misses us, and cannot bear to be without us. For why else would He desire for us to return?

We do not think much of what we are saying when we say we miss someone. That

is partly the result of an oddity of the history of the English language. If we were speaking properly, we would not say 'we miss someone' but, as other languages do 'we are missing someone.' In the same way we say we are missing our keys. We are saying that something that is supposed to be with me is not here; something that belongs with me is gone. It is the most tragic of all feelings, that something we must be with is absent.

Ultimately, it is the sadness we feel in death. There is no grief in knowing that someone has finished their trek in this life, and now lives in glory with the seraphs. The grief of death is in realizing that someone you loved is no longer there by your side. It is the grief of living a life always asking of a departed friend '*where are you?*' A question first ever asked only by God, to His friends in the garden; who sinned, and *surely died.*

Yet now He has come to His friends, His image, even the tax collector, those who have willfully abandoned Him. He was condemned to death, but no Life has come to him through a narrow gate.

The tax collector, this traitor, in his booth hears the word of the Lord, and what does he think?

"Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him."

So the Lord has brought back that which He was missing.

'And he rose and followed him.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Hosea 5:15-6:6; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13.