

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 7, 2026 – 2ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/PROPER 5, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: *“Jesus Comes for Us because We Need Him”*

Hosea 5:15—6:6	(Return to the Lord; He desires love, not sacrifices)
Psalms 50:7-15	(The Lord prefers thanksgiving to burnt offerings)
Romans 4:13-25	(God's promise to Abraham is for all believers)
St. Matthew 9:9-13	(Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector)

Shalom! My name is Matthew, although some in my family also call me Levi. Thank you for allowing me to come and speak to you today. I want to share a story that is very important to me—a story about an extraordinary day that changed my life forever.¹ It started out like any another day, nothing special. Got up, ate the same breakfast I always did and went to work, like any other weekday. Same old same old, working hard for the Man. In other words I was making a pile of money just like every other day. Being a tax collector is a pretty good gig, if you don't let the angry, complaining people get to you. Earnings are plentiful, hours aren't bad.

But, honestly, the one thing I don't like about my job is that it's hard to make friends. It seems most people don't like us tax collectors. I mean, who wants to admit they are buddies with an IRS agent? But hey, we have to make a living just like anyone else. It's not our fault the high life costs so much. Still, people just don't like us. Especially those holy guys, they treat us all as if we were dirty rotten cheats—just because we collect money on behalf of a foreign, occupying government and charge a hundred percent convenience fee so the person doesn't have to go all the way to Rome to pay their taxes. We're making their lives easier! But those holy guys won't give us a break. It's sinner this, and sinner that. They're always looking down their noses at us. Kinda hurts. But it's something I've grown to expect.

. . . Which is why I was completely caught off guard *that* day. There I was, just minding my own business, when to my utter surprise, the itinerant preacher from Galilee came toward my booth. I was genuinely shocked to see Him approach me, because so many people had been talking about Him as a great prophet. So when He came toward me, I figured I would end up as an example of the scum of the earth in His next sermon. Then, I heard Him speak these words, “Come, follow Me.” *What?* Drop everything, leave my profitable business and my nice, comfortable life? Even so, I was intrigued by His gentle yet powerful, meek but intense, charisma. He made me so curious I couldn't just sit there. I had to get up. And so, I followed Him. All the while, wondering, “Why me?”

Why did Jesus come up to *me* and tell *me* to follow Him? I didn't get it. Normally these holy types prefer to keep their distance and rant against people like me. So why did this prophet come to me? Why did He call *me* to follow Him? Wouldn't Jesus rather have someone less objectionable than me, as a disciple? You'd think hanging around me would make Him look bad; wouldn't be great for His image. I wonder if when He called me that day, His ratings slipped in the polls. After all, He was a holy man associating with *me*, an outcast. Why, when all the other holy men ignored and cursed me, did Jesus choose me? Of all people?

Even though I did not understand why Jesus chose me, I was relieved that I wasn't going to be held up as an example of how not to be. In fact, I felt so oddly honored, I invited my fellow tax-collectors and some neighbors to come and meet this Man of God who did not shun me. I threw quite a party and everyone was there. My work buddies showed up along with Jesus and His disciples. The roast lamb was delicious and the wine was an excellent vintage. We were having a wonderful time. I just wish the Pharisees—who were always sniffing around Jesus—had stayed away from my place that evening. Granted they didn't actually invite themselves to my party, but they did hover around my windows like a bunch of nosy gossips. Oh, they dared not lower themselves to set foot in my house, the house of a *tax collector*, so they hung around outside like a pack of hungry dogs. At least they didn't cause any trouble during dinner.

Unfortunately, that changed when we moved out into the courtyard to enjoy the abundant figs, grapes, and dates, along with some delightful nut pastries and more wine. Now, the Pharisees had a chance to talk to some of the guests. While I mingled with my fellow employees of Rome and played the proper host, I noticed some Pharisees had managed to corner Jesus' disciples. One of the Pharisees sneered loudly "Why does your teacher sit and eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Sinners? Ouch. How dare he call me a sinner? I don't go around crashing other people's parties. Besides, what did I ever do to those guys? Well, outside of collecting taxes for an occupying power. Sure, I may have overcharged a Pharisee every so often—well, actually, every time—but still. It's not as if they were going to put their money to good use, wasting it on the temple or in good works. Am I really so bad they have to label me and my guests as "sinners"? That term, in both Hebrew and Greek has the sense of "missing the mark," "especially wicked," "stained by vices or crimes," and "devoted to sin."²

Wow. If that's the case, then why did Jesus approach me in the first place? I know I haven't been a good person. Didn't care about goodness, only about looking out for number one, *me*. I've never helped out the poor. In fact, I taxed them for all they were worth, then I laughed at their destitution along with the rest of the Romans. While on the job, I didn't care who I hurt so long as I got what I wanted. I didn't care, because I've never cared for anyone as much as I cared about myself.

So why would Jesus come to me? I want to know, because it's obvious that I'm not good enough for Him. I'm stained with the dirt of a thousand sins. Why would Jesus want to be with someone as filthy as me? Wouldn't Jesus want to be with a person who doesn't fill the room with the foul stench of selfishness and pride? Yet from the start, He treated me like a friend. He willingly sat at my table and dined with me. I don't deserve Him—or His goodness, mercy, and compassion. I haven't done anything for Him, and I could never repay Jesus for all the kindness He has already shown me. Why, oh why, did He ever come to me with such love? In His light I saw all of my sinfulness. I don't deserve even a smile from Him. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"³

Later, I understood what Our Lord meant when He responded to the Pharisee who so rudely called my guests and me "sinners," meaning "the dregs of society." Jesus said that He "desires mercy, not sacrifice." What Jesus meant is that He doesn't want the empty sacrifices offered by the outwardly pious; He wants loving faithfulness that comes from the heart—the very same loving faithfulness Jesus showed *me* that day He called me to follow Him.

And so, now I can tell you why Jesus came for me, and why He called me to be His own. It wasn't because of anything I did for Him. Our Lord didn't call me, expecting me to be able to repay Him for my sins, errors, and omissions. No, He came to me for the very same reason He comes to each of you: Because I needed Him. I needed forgiveness and salvation. I needed eternal life, not death.

Jesus, our Savior, desires mercy. That's why He offered Himself for me so that I would be shown mercy, and so that I would show mercy to others in return—even though I did not deserve it and never will. Still, He came for me. Christ came for me as the doctor to treat my disease. He sought me out that day and healed me in every way. Jesus said He doesn't come for those who don't need a doctor. But who among us does not suffer from *some* ailment in our souls? The Hebrew word for mercy is *hesēd*, an extraordinarily rich term meaning "steadfast love," "righteousness," and "loyalty."⁴ And that's what Jesus imparts to all who will say "yes," to Him. *I'm so glad I did!*

Thank you for allowing me to be your guest this morning. And when you have time, please read the book I wrote. It's just titled, "The Gospel of Matthew." *Shalom!*

¹ Adapt. Keith Bowman, "The Call of Matthew According to Matthew," 28 November 2027, [SermonCentral.com](https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-call-of-matthew-according-to-matthew-keith-bowman-sermon-on-people-in-the-gospel-81604) <<https://sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-call-of-matthew-according-to-matthew-keith-bowman-sermon-on-people-in-the-gospel-81604>> 1 June 2026.

² Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, for ἁμαρτωλός – hamartólos, [BibleHub.com](https://biblehub.com/greek/268.htm) <<https://biblehub.com/greek/268.htm>> 2 June 2026.

³ "The Jesus Prayer," originating with the Desert Fathers in 5th-6th-century Egypt.

⁴ Fred Craddock et. al., *Preaching through the Christian Year – Year A: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*, (Philadelphia, Trinity Press, 1992), p. 320.