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Call of Matthew

Keating Series 1: Emotional Programs

Finding Happiness

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Matthew the tax collector was quite happy oppressing people till Jesus came along. He got a thrill from staring down the resentment in the fisherman's faces, as they handed over the tax for the catch of the day. It was a point of pride, his ability to stare down anyone till they cowered in submission. Each time he collected the tax, each time he added 10% for himself, he would get a zing of pleasure. He couldn't wait for the next hit. For a brief flash, he was happy. Good thing for him, there was always more taxes to collect for the empire—and for himself. Yup, he was perfectly happy oppressing people till Jesus came along.

But, then Jesus did come along and looked through him, into him, and Matthew noticed his dissatisfaction with his program for happiness. It would be too noble to say that he recognized the immorality of his tax-collection. He had rationalized this for a long time. It was more that he noticed that tax-collecting didn't ultimately satisfy. He wanted more and more, but it was never enough. When Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me," he woke to an inexhaustible longing. Shockingly, the stack of coins lost their luster. So he got up from his booth in hopes that Jesus would give him something that satisfied even more than money.

But, imagine the scene when the fishermen-disciples saw Jesus coming with Matthew in tow! This thief! They leered at him. And Matthew, from a lifetime of habit, leered back. So when the Pharisees asked the disciples, "Why does your rabbi eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" they probably said, "We have no frickin' clue! We're actually planning to poison Matthew at this dinner."

Jesus interrupted them. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

I can imagine the Pharisees saying to the disciples, “Haha, he says you’re sinners, just like Matthew.” The disciples, flummoxed by indignation, might declare, “We are not sinners, are we? Jesus called us because we are worthy. How can we be sick? We are strong from hauling fish. It’s Matthew who is sickly, not doing any manual labor, but getting fat off of us.”

Every once in a while, it is good to ask the question, “Why did people want to kill Jesus?” Today, my response is, “Have you ever wanted to kill someone who told you the truth about yourself?” Think of the last time someone told you a truth about yourself you didn’t like. How did it feel? Matthew, Peter, Andrew, James and John and the Pharisees were happily living in denial till Jesus came along. Of these people, the “worst” of them was Matthew. But that was his advantage. He was obviously sick, even to himself. On the other end, the Pharisees were the “best,”; they were pious, followed the Torah, served the poor, and gave their tithes studiously. Their illness was the least obvious, but just as wretchedly in need of grace. In fact, their over-identification with their goodness was their undoing. Note, it was the most pious, most religious, most morally superb that would call for Jesus’ blood. The fisherman-disciples, then, stood “in between,” Matthew and the Pharisees. They would need to decide: Do they need a physician because they were sick, like Matthew? Or were they just fine, in fact, better than most people, and did not need healing, like the Pharisees?

Ordinary Time is a great time to ponder these questions for ourselves. Do we need healing? What are our wounds? We are now in Ordinary Time; it is a growing season. But the reality is that in order to grow up, we must dig deep below. Before the ascent to the height of union with God, there is the descent into the belly of our wounds and hidden motivations. We must till the earth of our soul and consider what creepy crawly things hide there, these hidden motivations that drive us to behave in ways that even mystify ourselves. In the

next few months, I will give a sermon series based on the teachings of Thomas Keating, the great contemplative and teacher of inward transformation. We will examine his teachings on the nature of these hidden motivations, where they come from, how they construct a false self. We will learn how God, the divine physician, yearns to heal us and the methods we can employ to say “yes” to that healing.

So, let’s return to Matthew, our tax-collector who just started on the journey of transformation. What was his relationship to money? Did the money represent for him power and control? What about access to pleasure, to circles that gave him affection and esteem because of his wealth? Or does the money mean safety and security from an unsafe world, dominated by the Romans? What does wealth represent for you? Wealth is the perfect catch all for our deepest and most profound temporal yearnings: safety and security; esteem and affection; power and control.

These energy centers are instinctual. The oldest energy center is safety and security. I once heard an obstetrician say that humans really should have another few months in the womb. Because when we are born, we are more vulnerable than all other animals. Indeed, it is quite a shock to come out of the womb, from where one was completely taken care of. And, now born, the baby experiences hunger and cold. This is a challenge to the primal need for safety and security. If one is deprived of this at a young age, one might fixate on this energy center and hesitate to take the adventures of life later on.

In the second year of life, the child developed the great need for esteem and affection as they differentiate from their environment. Also in this second year, as they begin to begin to have a sense of one’s body, the third energy center begins to be a driver: power and control. All three instinctual energy centers are in place and motivating the child before they turn two.

Inevitably, at each of these energy centers, the child will experience some frustration of their satisfaction. The emotions here can be anger, fear, jealousy,

hostility, shame. What will happen, as we get older, is we devise compensatory ways for getting satisfaction in these areas with the cultural symbols of our day—for example, accumulating wealth. Or, we repress the painful experience into the unconscious, which will come out in an unexpected moment of frustration. An intensity of emotions can rush at us: hostility, rage, shame, anxiety, jealousy, fear. We find ourselves behaving in a way we don't really understand. Or, we are so convinced our actions make absolute sense that we cannot see that what we're doing is hurting someone—Or, if we do see, we don't care. Our program always makes us right and places the problem outside of ourselves.

All of this is at play in today's scene from the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, once you're aware of it, you can see it is everywhere in the bible and in your life. The apostle Paul lamented his own experience as "doing what I do not want to do and not doing what I want to do." Yet, Jesus offers us the way through.

Today, I want you to consider that to be a disciple is to take on a life of transforming our programs for happiness by God's grace. This is where true freedom is found. This is what's happening for Matthew, for the other disciples, and even for the religious leaders. Not all will be willing. For some, the examination of the creepy crawly things in the deep soil of the soul demands more honesty than they're willing to give. But, for those who are willing, it is the path that leads to healing ourselves, our relationships, our community—and yes, our world.

I'd like to end with some reflection questions for you to ponder: Which energy center do you tend to sit at the most? Is it safety and security? Is it a need for esteem and affection? Is it power and control? What emotion do you feel when you don't get that need met? If you have the stomach, ask someone you trust what they observe about you.

Slow and steady, we will journey together in ordinary time, sussing out the ordinary junk, like what we did on work day, to arrive with more head and heart space. Together, we listen to God and follow Jesus.