



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 2

June 7, 2026

The Meaning of Faith

Matthew 9:9–13

⁹ As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he arose and followed Him.

¹⁰ Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹² When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Are you a believer? Are you as big a believer as Abraham who, against all hope, believed and became the father of many nations? Have you ever worried that you don't have that kind of faith, that maybe you don't have enough faith?

Well, you've come to the right place! Because this is the place for people who don't find in themselves any kind of faith worth trusting. It might surprise you to learn that Abraham confessed that as well. And yet, in *hope*, he believed. That is, in the Words and Promises of God, Abraham believed, though there was nothing in himself worth trusting.

That's where you and I now stand: in hope in the Words and Promises of God for us in Jesus Christ, in the Faith that calls us baptized and forgiven, and enlightens us to the reality that God would not let us founder in our sin, but sent His Son to die and rise again for people who don't have a thing in them worth trusting! That's real hope, beloved – real faith, for real sinners like you and me.

It's the kind of hope that Jesus brings to sinners in today's Gospel. He encounters this man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. Here was someone who had nothing in his favor, nothing to commend him to God. At least, not in the eyes of others. He was really no worse off than anyone else, however, except he took the people's money, and that won't make you popular with anyone, but what was worse was that he did it for the Romans. Now, that's a sinner if there ever was one! That's how the people in Jesus' day saw it. But Matthew was just the kind of person Jesus was looking for, the kind of person He came to save – a tax collector, the lowest of the low in the eyes of respectable society, and He said to him, "Follow me." And, you know what? He did.

The next thing we hear is that Jesus is reclining at dinner in Matthew's house. When



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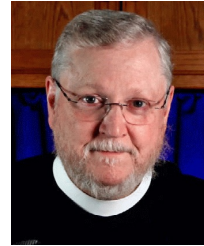
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the Pharisees got wind of it, they were incensed and started complaining to His disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why doesn't He keep Himself pure, like we do? Why doesn't He limit His associations to people like us, who are righteous, holy, and full of faith?" That's how they saw themselves – as those who believed in God so much that they ran their lives in perfect accordance with His Law. But, unlike Abraham, who knew he was as good as dead; or Matthew, who didn't find a thing in himself worth bringing to the Savior, the Pharisees were sure they were alive, and well and healthy. They knew the Ten Commandments and their meanings, but they missed their diagnosis. They thought the Commandments were about convincing God they were holy, and not about convincing us that we're dead.

And that's tragic, because Jesus says that the Law is about informing righteous people of their sin, and big believers of their unbelief, so that they know they're just as unworthy as Matthew the tax collector was for Jesus' calling. He tells the Pharisees: "It isn't healthy people who need a doctor, but the sick. . . For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." So, if you're sick with sin and unbelief, Jesus says: "I'm just the One for you." He doesn't say: "Show me the one who has faith or righteousness or holy living," but rather: "Show me the one who has sins." And to those, He says: "Come, follow Me. I came for you." And that, beloved, means you and me; it means Abraham, and Matthew, and the Pharisees as well, because they had as many sins as the others. But they had turned faith into a work and were just too sure in themselves to believe they were actually sick; too busy showing God what was good in them to imagine they rather belonged with the sinners reclining at table with Jesus.

So, Jesus told the Pharisees: "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice." "You know the words, which is very good, but now go learn what they are all about – how My Father doesn't want you justifying yourselves by your works, as if those were how someone makes it in with God. No. I want you to be just as certain as Abraham that you're dead in your sins, and just as sure as Matthew that you don't have a thing worth bringing." But most of all, He wanted them to know that the heart of God is this: to show mercy to the merciless, and love to those unlovable. He wants them, and you and me as well, to know that when we're looking at ourselves and so sure that God is pleased with what He sees there – that's not what God desires, and if that's what we think, then Jesus didn't come for us. Because He came for sinners. When we recognize that there's nothing in us to win God's heart, *then* God is happy. *Then* Jesus came for us. For Jesus seats Himself with sinners, proclaiming: "If anyone here is so full of sin and unbelief that he can't bring a thing to God, and so he'll have to go to hell for who he is, then *that's* the one I love. And *that's* the one I died and rose to save. And *that's* the one I bathe, absolve, and feed."

So, tell me, dear Christian: Where should we sinners be on the Lord's day? Right



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here, because there isn't any faith or hope or confidence for us except in Jesus – in His Baptism, in His Absolution, in His Preaching, and in His Supper. And if Jesus didn't go on speaking, feeding, absolving, and baptizing, then there's just no way we could keep on believing. *That's* the faith of Abraham, who, against all hope, *in* hope – that is, hope in the promises of God – believed. And that's where *you* are today, beloved. In hope – that is, hope in Jesus, who tells you that He's come for you – because you've got exactly what it takes to be a Christian. You have sin. And you have ears to hear what Jesus loves to say, and that is: "I forgive you all your sins." And *that's* your faith, dear Christian; your sure and certain hope. Because it speaks to those who are dead in trespasses and sins and says: "You are alive." Because it speaks to sinners and declares them to be saints.

"But, pastor, we do believe, I mean, we confess in the Creed that we believe, right?" Absolutely! And thank God that, when you say those words, it's always God's Word that follows: "I believe in God the Father, in Jesus Christ His Son, and in the Holy Spirit." God has given you nothing less to put behind those words: "I believe ...". No vague generalities will do. We believe, and the only sort of believing that matters is believing what God says. That's how it was for Abraham, who knew there was no hope in him, not in his old, dead body. But God declared that he would have a son, and Abraham believed and it was "credited to him as righteousness." So, there was nothing in Abraham that he could trust, but there was plenty worth trusting in words of God. And there's plenty worth trusting in the life-giving words of Jesus, the washing and regenerating water of His baptism, and in His very flesh and blood given under the bread and wine of His Holy Supper for your salvation. There is so much hope and faith for you in Jesus, that there simply isn't any other place for you to be today.

What other place could there be? Who else eats with you, no matter what you look like? Who else says: "I am so far from loathing sinners, that for their sakes alone I have come"? That's what's going on for you and me in Jesus. And it's a far cry from the kind of "faith" that wants to hold up our own works before God and demand that He accept and approve them. My friend, Jesus doesn't want you hoping in yourself, in all your man-made notions of what pleases God; He wants you hoping against hope because your hope is in Him.

So, do you have faith? Of course you do. And a far more abundant faith than anything that's going on inside of you. You have the Word of God – in preaching, in Bible study, and in the daily catechesis and devotion in your home. And by the way, if you don't have a daily devotion going on in your home, it's time to get started. What are you waiting for? You need to hear *every* day the words you've heard today, "I forgive you all your sins." You sin everyday, and you need to be reminded everyday, of the words of Jesus: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Beloved, you have a Savior who declares that you are alive when you're dead; that



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you are forgiven when you're still a sinner; that you have faith, when you're full of doubt, and all of this, because your Savior is Christ Jesus. *That's* the faith He wants you to live in each day – the faith that tells you there's no better place for you than right here in the midst of sinners. That's what sat Him down with sinners in the house of Matthew, and it's what hung Him up between two thieves. It's what moves Him to say to you: "Come, follow me. There's nothing left for you in you, but everything for you in Me. And I'm here for you – right here in My Word and Sacrament. In me – and only in me – your sin is canceled. So what other place is there for you but in me? For I make you holy, righteous, and forgiven." And that, dear Christian, is plenty of faith for *any* sinner! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen