

## Our Callings May 26, 2024

**Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church**

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*Loved & Sent.* You are greatly and dearly loved, and you are sent into this world with more purpose than you could ever imagine. This is what we have been talking about. Do you know who you are? Or maybe I should phrase that differently. Do you know who's you are? Do you know who loves you more than anything? And that love will never change. It is, of course, this God who loves you. You are so greatly and dearly loved—this foundation, it may seem trite; it may seem simple; but this love forms a foundation that as you go through life, and as you go through challenges and struggles, some of which you never thought you would ever have to go through, some of which are going to be bigger than you think you can get through.

This love will form a foundation that you can stand upon and stand upon, not just of your own doing of your own strength, but with the Lord's strength. I mean, this is incredible—this simple thing of knowing that you are loved. And being secure in that releases you and gives you freedom to live in this world in a completely different way than other ways we are taught.

So today we are going to talk about how we live in this world as people who are loved and people who are sent. We are going to talk about our callings. Have you ever thought about your life as made up of all these different types of callings? Have you ever heard the word vocation?

There is that too. Our vocations, the things that we do. In different spheres in our lives, the way that we go about our life, the relationships that we have, all this is wrapped up in this idea from scripture called a calling. And when we get this right away in our gospel lesson today, we get an episode of Jesus calling one of his disciples to follow him.

This happens to be a *Calling of Matthew*. Now, where is the word Matthew in today's text? It does not exist. And it is the *Calling of Levi* in the book of Luke. Jesus leaves the town He was in. He saw a tax collector named

Levi, or Matthew, we are going to use those interchangeably, sitting at his tax collector's booth.

Follow me and be my disciple, Jesus said to him. So what does Levi do? He gets up; he leaves everything and follows him. That seems pretty straightforward. In fact, this happens at different points in scripture when Jesus calls James and John or Peter and Andrew. They stop what they are doing. And they leave where they are at, and they follow Jesus. This one, though, is a little bit different. I mentioned before, we have this change in name, right? Matthew or Levi, it is the same person. Why would he be referred to as one or the other? Let's look at this a little bit more closely.

Jesus goes into a new town, and He points out the tax collector. And He points at the tax collector and says, "Follow me." Okay, let's think about this a little bit. Anybody work for a tax collecting agency around here? Some of us do. And that's okay. It is not that big of a deal. But in Jesus' day, that was a huge deal because, for tax collectors, the way their tax system worked was that the people in a region like Judea would go to the Romans who controlled the area, and they would buy a contract. They would purchase the right to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans in that region. And so, once they did this, they put their own money out and the Romans would give them authority to collect taxes in that region. So what would they do? They would go door to door, and they would say, "You owe X amount of whatever for taxes."

Think about this. What is the incentive here? The tax collector needs to recoup his costs. So, when he goes to your door and says, "You owe me this much money for taxes," how much could that be? Is there a formula for this? Can you look it up on the World Wide Web and find this? No! The tax collector can tell you literally anything because he has the authority to collect the taxes. Depending on how much money that tax collector wanted to make and how wealthy he wanted to be, he would take that money from all of us as he wanted. This was the tax collector.

Any idea how many friends this guy would have in the town? Zero. Now, here is what makes it even more interesting. Not only was Levi a tax collector, but his name is Levi, which people named Levi come from a family in this region of Judea that is very well esteemed a family whose importance lies in where they worshiped and in their religion. Not only was this person working for the Romans, but he was working against his

primary identity against his people. So not only did the Romans not like him because he was Jewish, but his Jewish friends did not like him because he was working for the Romans. So how many friends again, did he have?

I tell you all that to tell you this: this is the person that Jesus chose to follow Him. If you have ever been in a spot where you feel like you are alone, where your friend list is negative, where nobody cares. If you have ever felt like you are not worthy of love, Jesus sees you. And just like Matthew, just like Levi, He calls you to follow Him. He calls you out of great love for you because you have been created by His Father as one of His masterpieces that, in Jesus, what Jesus was going to do in dying and rising, He knew He was going to make you new as well. He gives you a purpose in this world. He knows that when you follow Him, your life will not be the same. It will be transformed in such a way that you will be able to see the world differently, and you will be able to bring the joy and the peace that Jesus has brought to you to others. And in this way, God's kingdom is made real for others to see.

When Jesus looks at each one of us, He calls us to follow Him. Not because of what we have done or what we have not done, but simply because we are loved by him. Do not let anything else get in the way of that. Do not ever think that you are not enough. Do not ever think that you could not possibly be loved because that's exactly what God says to you. You are loved and I'm going to give you a purpose.

So Jesus says this to Levi, and Levi responds. He leaves his old ways behind, and he follows Jesus. So he left everything. He left his job; he left the people that he knew; he left all of his friends, which was not hard because that was zero, and he followed Jesus. See, Jesus gives freedom from our past when we follow him, and he gives us hope, gives us hope that we are part of a community, a community of people who do not look at us the way that everybody else does. Look at us with great love with great patience with great joy.

In our book that we have been reading, *Loved & Sent*, this is the way that Pastor Cloeter put this. He says our callings, the ways that we are called to be in this world, are gifts from God. They start with Him for sure and their purpose is not for us. It is not an ego boost. We do not have gifts and skills and talents and relationships for us. We have it for the good of others. And what we are going to do through those relationships is not about

building a kingdom for ourselves, which we are very, very tempted to do; it is very easy to do, to build a kingdom of followers, build a kingdom of wealth, build a kingdom of status. Instead, we are called to build a kingdom for the Lord, to work with His kingdom which is all about giving people freedom and a life that lasts throughout all eternity.

So, what does Levi do? He holds a banquet. He goes back; he says, Jesus, come back to my house, be the guest of honor, and all of my friends are going to come. And who are his friends? Who can tax collectors be friends with? Other tax collectors, right? People in the same boat. So many of his fellow tax collectors go, and they eat with him and other people, some of Jesus disciples, probably some, maybe some people who were in the community, who were important, were at least invited.

When we are called to follow Jesus, He changes our lives. He makes us different. He changes the way we see the people around us and the world around us. And if you were going to hold a banquet and put Jesus as the guest of honor, if you got to be in Matthew's place, my question for you now is who would you invite to that banquet?

Who would you invite to your house to meet Jesus? I want you to think just for a second about who you would actually invite. If you could have Jesus come to your house for dinner, who would you invite to come meet him? Some of us might be thinking, "I would not know who else to invite." Kind of in the shoes of Matthew. Others of you are like, "How can I possibly fit all these people in my house," or wherever you live? Like, how do I do that? I bet that the people that you thought of fall into one of these four categories: Home, Work, Neighborhood, and Congregation. And this is how we start to think about the realms in which God blesses us with relationships, with people around us, through which we are called to help them see Jesus.

Of course, there is home. Whatever your home is, that's where Jesus has put you, and you have a unique relationship with the people in your house. Your children can only have you as their person. So does your wife or your husband: you are a wife or a husband to your wife or husband. And it is only you. You have a unique role to fulfill within this house. At work, it is the same. Some of us are still working; others among us are retired; but we know what this is all about. At work, we have professional relationships with people, but there is more to it. The interactions you have

with others each and every day, the way you speak, the way you act, they show who you are in our community, in our neighborhoods, and all the teams and groups that you are affiliated with. I guarantee you, judging by the number of kids that are here today, people have lots of groups and teams that they are affiliated with. I remember when my kids were in travel sports, Memorial Day weekend was always the big tournament weekend. And so people would be gone all week long, traveling everywhere, doing that. And those people that you got to know on that team as adults. Well, you hung out with them a lot. You spent a lot of time with them. How are you called to be Jesus with them? And then, of course, we have our congregation. Our church community here together is another realm through which we share and show Jesus together. Now, here is the temptation—the temptation for us is to look at church and say, “That’s where Jesus is in my life. When I’m at church, when I participate at church, that’s where Jesus is. I am going to put that in a box and leave it right over here. And in all these other places, well, work is for work, neighborhoods for neighborhood, homes for home.”—we have this tendency to kind of compartmentalize our religion and leave it at church on Sundays.

Scripture does not talk that way. The way that scripture talks is that Jesus loves you every single day of the week, that you are called every single day of the week, every day that you have breath, every day that the Lord blesses you with to help other people see Him more clearly. And so on Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays and all of the days that end with day, you get to be around other people.

How can you show Jesus to them? Think about these four realms. In our Epistle reading, Paul takes us a little further. He says, look in whatever you do, especially your work, which Paul did—Paul was not just a preacher. He had a job outside of that too—he said, whatever you are doing, work as though you are working for the Lord and not for people.

If you ever had a glimpse of this in what you do for a career or for a living or what you do as your main thing, where you realize that you are not making this thing or managing this thing or doing this thing just for you or for your boss. Did you ever have a glimpse that you are actually doing it for the Lord, that the Lord is somehow blessing you through this and allowing you to be a blessing to others through what you do.

On Memorial Day weekend, we think of those who have given their lives for us. And we know that that is a way that people have served and given everything for the people around them. As we work, we work, and we remember that we are working for the Lord, that our master is not the earthly master that we see, but is Jesus.

And so the way that we go about our work matters. It matters. And Paul says again in Galatians, “Do not get tired of doing what is good. Every opportunity you have, remember that you can do good to everyone, especially those in the family of faith, but not only wherever you are, whatever you are doing, your identity is not changed.” Just like when kids were all over the sanctuary. They have not changed. God loves them and has called them exactly the same way. Wherever they are, they are called to share Jesus with the people around them.

So, the question I get as a pastor, people come to me and say, “How can I use my gifts? How can I really know where God is calling me to be and what He is calling me to do?” There are five things that come through in our book, *Loved & Sent*. First, we start with PRAYER because our gifts, because who we are as a gift from God, we always remember that it is from Him. Everything we have is a blessing from Him. And so we start by talking with Him. We often write prayers up here and there are those flowery languages we use sometimes, but while that’s good and fine, our prayer can be simply just talking with God. It is just you talking with God or you and your family or you and the people at work who believe as you do talking with God.

That’s where we begin. That’s where we understand and start to remember that it is not about us, but it is about Him and what He is working through us. So we pray. We start with Him. We ask Him to open doors to bless us in ways that He has already figured out, but which we cannot see yet. And then we **START RIGHT WHERE WE ARE**. God has brought us here to this time and this place With these people for a reason. you may not be able to see that really clearly right now, but it is true. What is God working through you with these people? Then it is going to take some work to **KNOW WHO YOU ARE**, to know what your gifts, skills, and talents are. Some of us know this very early in our lives, and some of us just keep developing them and do not know anything at all until finally at the end of our lives, we look back and say, “Wow, God really blessed me with some

really amazing things.” Either way is fine, but do a little bit of the work and see what can you do that maybe other people cannot. “What do I see that other people do not see?” This is the beauty of being in a place like Our Savior’s Way. We have so many different ministries that we are part of, ways that we are able to share Jesus with others. And you may see one way and think, “I could really help out with that. But this other way, I have no interest in doing that at all.” And that’s absolutely okay because there are other people who will do that and see things the way that you do as well. The last one is to UNDERSTAND YOUR CONTEXT. Understand where you are. Understand the world in which we live and how Jesus is active in redeeming it. One of the things that I read this week was some research talking about how we as a community have become much more inwardly focused than we ever have been.

Are any of you familiar with Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, 2000? Wrote this big book called *Bowling Alone*, and the basic thesis that people took out of it was: People used to bowl in groups. They used to be in bowling leagues. Not many of us bowl these days as much. But this used to be a huge thing. People would have these big leagues and groups, and it was a way for the community to come together. But by the year 2000, he found that no longer were people gathering to bowl, but they were going on their own. And this is what I grew up in. When I was a teenager, we would go and go to the bowling alley on our own. And it was great fun. Not a league today, though.

Can you imagine how much we have changed since 2000 to right now? Research has been coming out after our recent COVID period talking about this too. And our sense of isolation and individualness has gotten much more severe. So much so the way the researcher put it was, “We used to bowl in groups, then we would bowl alone. Now we just watch other people bowl on our phones.” Threefold. That’s what we have come to. We do not have to leave the place where we live to do the things that we used to do together.

Our context here, our context right now is that world. We cannot change it all at once, but what we can do is bring Jesus to it. We can help people within it experience it. We can help in places like this where you get together with people that you do not know, which does not happen in many other phases of life and places. Through this church, through this

congregation, you can show there is something good about being together and not just scrolling at home.

Finally, you have to have the courage to USE YOUR GIFTS. This is where the Spirit comes in to overcome the obstacles that you have to know your gifts and to actually use them. For example, this is the first Sunday that Sunday school is out. Sunday school is going to start again when school starts in August. Can you guess what we are going to ask for about like the middle of July or the end of July? We are going to ask for people to help with Sunday school, teachers and helpers. And you may be thinking, could I use my gifts? Do I have gifts in this area? Well, if you do, maybe it is the cue to say, “Maybe I can give this a try this year.” Sometimes we have to just get over that initial “can I give this a try? Can I get out of my comfort zone?” Use your gifts.

So understanding our callings means looking at where God has placed you—home, work, community, congregation. And then it comes to this process of praying, of knowing where God has placed you, understanding who He is made you to be, and allowing the Spirit to work, pulling you out of your comfort zone and serving Him with great joy, Amen.

All right, this is how we make *Loved & Sent* real. This is how we take this into every day and not just Sundays. This is how the people around you see how good Jesus is through what He does in your life. I pray that each of us digs into this a little bit this summer, think about how we can be Jesus’ people in our neighborhoods, at work, at home, especially as we band together here in Our Savior’s Way and help more and more people be connected with this God who loves us so much.

Let’s close with a word of prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank You for the way that You have created each and every one of us uniquely. We pray, Lord, that the callings You have given to us in these four realms and all the relationships you have given to us, that we would be able to show, Lord, who You are to the people around us.

We pray that You give us strength and courage, trusting in Your Spirit to help us do just that. We pray it all in the name of Jesus. Amen.