



Jesus Calls Levi To Be A Disciple by William Hole

The Tension of Two Worlds

Today, we celebrate the ministry and calling of Saint Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. To help in our meditation, we have an image based on today's Gospel text. The painting is by William Hole and is entitled "Jesus Calls Levi the Tax Collector." The image before us will allow us to gaze into a different world, a world where Levi himself lives and works. As we gaze into this world, we will experience a moment in time, a moment of tension. This morning, I want us to consider the tension of this moment, a moment when we are called out of the way of the world into the way of Jesus our Lord. It's a moment when we are called to take up our crosses to follow Christ. And it's a moment when we are promised relief and comfort amid our burdens. It's the moment when Jesus walked by an unassuming tax collector and said two simple words: "Follow me."

As we gaze into this image, we are brought into a world where tension surrounds us. First, turn your attention to the right side of the painting. Levi, dressed in fine red robes, is standing at the far end of the tax collectors' table. Behind his right shoulder stands a Roman guard. Levi wasn't a Roman, but he worked for them. He worked for the enemy, the oppressors of the Jews. He worked for that guy behind his right shoulder, the one who was standing with his arms crossed, looking at the Jews with disgust. This guard is an immediate reminder of the oppressive burden of the world. His presence is in stark juxtaposition with the Jews, the people of God, the oppressed. To be a Jew in the time of Levi was to bear the burden of an oppressed people. The burden of this oppression was as harsh as it was historical. Think slavery in Egypt. Think victims of Philistine and Edomite raids. Think whipping boys for Assyrian and Babylonian aggression. Think another weak nation for the Greek armies of Alexander the Great to ransack. But this historical and harsh burden united the Jews against outsiders. If you were a Jew in the time of Levi, you were part of a nation that withstood centuries of oppression and still remained. It was the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, that had been brought through this oppression by the power of God. Amid oppression, Israel could hold fast to the promises of the Lord. To be a part of this nation meant standing with your people in faith and against all oppressors.

And these Jews surrounded Levi. He couldn't get away from them. He was a tax collector, after all. His job was to collect from his own people. Further to his right, we can see Jews waiting in line to pay their taxes. It's in this scene, at this moment, that the tension

becomes palpable. Levi was a Jew, yet he was a tax collector. The nation that oppressed Levi's people is the same nation for which Levi worked. Yet, Levi worked among his own people, the people of God. Imagine how he feels in the midst of the tension of this moment! Feel the uneasiness that was slowly tearing him apart! It's the tension between the people of God and their oppressors. The only thing that could make this tension almost bearable was sitting on the table in front of him. The money was good – very good. This money drove the Tax Collectors. It was truly the tax collectors' master. But, as Levi clutches the money in his hand, we can't help but imagine that the money couldn't completely release the tension in Levi's life. The money didn't quite alleviate his feelings of guilt for taking from God's people to give to their oppressors. The yoke of his masters was hard, and the burden of his tension was heavy, like the gold and silver that weighed down the scales of the hated tax collectors. The tension isn't going away.

We can't help but feel this way about Levi's world, because it's our world. The world in which we live every day is a world of tension. We're caught in this tension, pulled on one side by the people of God and the other side by the world. This tension is easy to spot, if you just look around. The world has a powerful pull, doesn't it? Its claims and offers are almost impossible to ignore. You want fame? Think American Idol, The Voice, or YouTube. You want cash? Think stocks, sweepstakes, and slot machines. You want pleasure? Think Playboy, pornography, or prostitutes. Maybe it's more subtle. Maybe it's something that seems downright Christian. Liberty. Freedom. Happiness. Health. Security. But, these promises distract from the promises of God. They pull us into a tension with the people of God, with people of faith. People who have been called to desire what God promises. People who have been united by the words and promises of the Lord against the oppression of the world. People who kneel before their Master in reverence and submission, who seek comfort in what God has done to remove the burdens of sin and give them life and salvation. When we gaze into our immediate surroundings, we see that tension. We can feel it. We might even look in the mirror, only to see that we are kneeling before something, bearing the burden of what we have been promised by the world, the burdens of what we seek after. They weigh us down and force us to kneel before them in reverence and dependence. The money, the fame, the happiness, the health, the security might make the tension almost bearable in our minds.

But this morning, turn your attention to the other half of the painting. As we change our focus, we see the world in which Jesus also walks. A world still full of tension. A world still full of burdens. But, it's a world ruled by its rightful master.

Look now at the left side of the painting. Jesus, of course, is at the forefront. He's at the center, standing in front of the tax collectors' table. In the distance, we see the sea from which Jesus has just come. There are three boats that have been emptied of their fishermen. And there's a group of people talking at the dock, looking up at Jesus. Jesus' ministry began by the sea as he called his first disciples, asking them to give up everything to follow him. *While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.* And so, as he walks away from that sea, we imagine his disciples following him in tension, leaving the lives they have known for a life of unknown burden. In fact, we can see it here. The man behind Jesus is stooped over under the weight of what he is carrying. These men have been called into a tension between following Christ and remaining in their own occupations. To a tension between the security of the world and the unknown of following Jesus. To a tension between the promises of the world and the words of our Lord.

It's here, as we move from the sea to the center, we begin to understand the tension of the moment. This man, hunched over behind Jesus, bears a burden as he follows Jesus. Truly, following Jesus means bearing a burden. But, it's a burden that brings our beings into postures of submissive surrender, surrender to the one Lord and Master of the world. The man reminds us of Jesus' words, which ring forever in our ears. *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.* It's here and now that the tension between the two worlds becomes so apparent. On the one hand, we have the man hunched over under the weight of the burden of following Jesus. But, notice the man in front of Jesus. Here's a man turned away from Christ, kneeling down in front of the money scales, stagnant and oblivious. You can imagine that it's almost a position of reverence. When we look at this man, we also can't help but feel the burden that's weighing

him down, pushing his shoulders down and his face toward the money. A burden that drove him to make as much money as he could. He kneels under the burden of the money he so cares about. The burden of money pushes him into a posture of submissive surrender in front of his master.

At this moment, in this place, we encounter the tension of two worlds. One man kneels before his money scales. The other is hunched over behind Jesus, walking into the city with Jesus, bearing the burden of following him. Bearing this burden, following Jesus, means walking in the way Jesus walked. It means being led to the places where Jesus was led. The way from the sea into the city is the way of the cross. On this path, Jesus walked through the streets, hunched over under the weight of the heavy piece of splintering wood. Several times, he was forced to kneel under the burden of the heavy cross. As Jesus hung on that same cross, his body sunk under the weight of the sins of the world. It's there, at that moment, under that burden, that the tension is unmistakable. It's the tension between the Lord of the World and the ruling oppressors of it, those who would crucify him. The oppressors are there to save themselves – to kill an innocent man to keep the status quo. But it's the Lord of the World, the King of Creation who hangs there, his arms outstretched, burdened by the cross, fulfilling his mission to save *all* people, to save *you*. He hangs there to take away the sins *of the whole world*, to take away *your* sins. The earth itself quakes and is torn apart under this burden, the burden of the one who would save and recreate that very world. In this world, Jesus is both Creator and Redeemer, both Master and Lord.

This, then, is the center of the painting. Jesus and the world. “Stay here” and “Follow me.” This place is where the two worlds pull away in a tight tension, with Levi pulled in two directions. It's a place of tension between the way of the cross and the way of glory. Between God and money. Between losing your life and trying to save it for yourself. Jesus says, *No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.* To heed Jesus' words, to “follow him,” means bearing the burden of the cross itself. It means forsaking the world – it's rulers, oppressors, and empty promises. It means kneeling before Jesus, the Master and Lord, who bears the burdens of the world. It's here, in this place, that we see Levi, with one hand grasping the money so very, very tightly, but with the other hand reaching toward the outstretched arm of Jesus. With his body behind

the table of tax collectors but his eyes fixed and focused on the Christ. With one man reverencing the money scales on Levi's left, and another man bearing his burden behind Jesus on Levi's right. With the way of oppression around him and the way of the cross in front of him.

And this is exactly the place where many of us have found ourselves in the past, or perhaps even now. We find ourselves in the middle of a tension between two worlds. Two worlds that carry with them burdens of their own. We find ourselves at a place where we feel the oppressive call of the world's empty promises, and where we hear the call of the Lord Jesus to take up our crosses to follow him. But it's in the midst of this tension that we hear the Master's words to Levi – to his disciples – to us. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* Jesus doesn't promise a life free of burden. No, the one Lord and Master of all, the one who defeated death and evil, takes our burdens onto himself. He takes them and bears them on the cross that he carried through the streets. Our burdens really are taken up by Christ, the Lord and Master of all, who can and does follow through.

This morning, as we gaze into the world of Levi the Tax Collector, we find ourselves brought into a moment of tension. In the midst of this moment, at the moment when Jesus asks Levi to "follow me," we see Jesus walking forward. Even as he looks into the face of Levi, his feet continue on the way into the city. This morning, Jesus continues to do the same. He is looking you in the eyes, inviting you to follow him. Yes, you may be caught in a moment of tension. Your natural inclinations will want you to remain in your own world. But, Jesus calls us away from our own worlds, away from those things before which we might be kneeling, onto the way – the way of the Cross. Truly, on this road we will bear the burdens of our crosses. But, in the face of Christ, we find peace, and we follow him. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Amen. .*