

Sunday, February 8, 2026 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany Worship Sermon  
"The God Who Invites Sinners" Pastor Takaaki Inoue  
Hosea 6:1-6, Matthew 9:9-13

### ① 【The beginning is Jesus】

Today, let's talk about the scene where Matthew, one of the Twelve Apostles, was chosen. He was a tax collector. At that time, the nation of Israel was under the rule of the Roman Empire, and each person had to pay taxes to Rome. Tax collectors were the ones who collected and paid those taxes. Many of them cheated people out of taxes, so they were deeply disliked by the people. Furthermore, the Jews considered foreigners unclean. Consequently, tax collectors, who associated with these unclean people, were also deemed unclean and shunned by their own community. It is said they would not greet them on the street, enter their homes, touch them, or eat with them. It was this tax collector, Matthew, whom Jesus chose as His disciple.

Verse 9 states: "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him." It was not Matthew who saw Jesus and followed Him. Jesus first noticed Matthew and invited him. The beginning of faith does not lie in ourselves, but in Christ. St. Paul declared, "I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). The day of Christ Jesus refers to the day of His return. The "good work" is faith. Here too, it is written that God initiated faith. Before going to the cross, Jesus clearly told His disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you... and I appointed you. The Bible consistently declares that faith begins with God. God chose me. We often think only of ourselves, wondering, "Do I feel like doing it today? Can I do it?" But first, let us consider God's thoughts, God's will. God is calling you, desiring you, and asking you to do this work.

### ② 【Rise Up and Continue Following Jesus】

Verse 9 states, "He got up and followed Jesus." Reading Luke's Gospel, it says, "He got up, left everything, and followed Jesus." " (Luke 5:28). I believe his joy—that Jesus accepted him, treated him as a human being, and called him as a disciple, when no one else would have anything to do with someone like him—manifested itself in the action of "leaving everything behind to follow." In other words, he found someone so wonderful that he was willing to leave everything behind! Matthew admired and grew to love Jesus, who had called him.

It says "followed Jesus," but the verb form emphasizes that he "began the action of walking." That is, Matthew "began to follow Jesus, began walking behind Jesus." We must not treat "following" as a past event. If you used to go to church often, if you used to read the Bible often, but you are not doing so today, then you are not

following. Following means continuing.

●Nikkō Tōshō-gū has one pillar intentionally built upside down. This stems from Tokugawa Ieyasu's teaching: "Since all completed things inevitably decay, one must leave at least one element unfinished." It's good to always see oneself as imperfect. Once, a priest from another church told me, "That church is a fake." If this church is fake, then you all are fake believers too. How rude, right? So I replied, "Yes, I am a fake. That's precisely why I come to church to pray today, striving to become genuine. The moment someone thinks they're real and takes pride in it, their growth stops and they begin to rot. What defines authenticity? Isn't it those who recognize their own incompleteness and continue to follow Christ who are truly real?"

### ③ **【God who sits with sinners】**

Looking at Luke's Gospel, we see that after this, Matthew held a grand banquet at his house for Jesus and invited his fellow tax collectors. (Luke 5:29) I believe he wanted to introduce Jesus to everyone, the One who had accepted him. In Matthew's Gospel, it says, "While Jesus was having dinner at his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and his disciples." Matthew's house became a gathering place for sinners centered on Jesus, serving as a prototype for the church. You are among them. Within the house of the church, we sit at one table centered on Jesus and share a meal together. This is the Lord's Supper. It is people and God sitting at one table, eating together. Eating is living. To eat together means to live together. We sit at the table to live with God. The verb "was sitting" indicates continuity (imperfect tense). It means Jesus would continue to eat with sinners without end. Thus, God and sinners became one family. Jesus was often called "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." He chose to be their friend. He stands not on God's side, but on the sinners' side. Therefore, throughout my sinful life, Jesus has always been with me. He always sits at the same table where I am, always humbly accepting to be called my companion. How awe-inspiring and profoundly grateful this is! Therefore, it is good to partake of the Lord's Supper even while sinful. To live continually receiving Jesus's unmerited love, forgiveness, and life—that is what it means to follow Him.

### ④ **【I need you】**

Seeing this, the Pharisees said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (verse 11). Being with Jesus means you are already in the kingdom of heaven. So this question implies, "How can God admit such people into heaven? How can God grant forgiveness to such sinners?" They misunderstood what faith is. They thought faith was something only pure-hearted, virtuous people practiced. Hearing this, Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (verse 17). It

is the sick who need a doctor. It is sinners who need God. Faith is not something pure-hearted people do; it is something people do precisely because their hearts are impure. It is not because we can do it perfectly, but because we cannot. To put it another way, I believe Jesus wanted to say simply this: "It is because they need me." And He asks the Pharisee: "How much do you need me? Do you long for me like air or water? They need me more than you do. That is why they will enter the kingdom of heaven before you. That is all there is to it."

●Philip Yancey was invited by a friend to attend an AA meeting. AA stands for Alcoholics Anonymous, a self-help group for people with alcohol dependency. His friend told Yancey, "Come along, and I think you'll see what the early church was like." So he visited the building, where he found well-known politicians and wealthy businessmen sitting alongside unemployed poor people and children with needle marks. Self-introductions went like this: "Hi, I'm Tom. I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict." Then everyone would say, "Hi, Tom." They listened with sympathy, welcomed each other warmly, hugged repeatedly, laughed, and cried. They were all companions facing the same problem. Yancey asked a friend, "What does AA have that church doesn't?" His friend answered, "None of us can manage on our own strength. Isn't that why Jesus came? But most people in church seem to cultivate this self-satisfied atmosphere, as if they're pious and superior. I don't feel like they're truly relying on God or each other. ... When an alcoholic goes to a church like that, they can only feel like a flawed failure. ... It's precisely because I'm an alcoholic that I know I can't live without God."

How much do you need Jesus? The Jews rejected Him, saying, "We don't need someone like you." That is the cross. Yet even on the cross, Jesus forgave their sins and prayed for them. "They don't understand what they truly need. They are reaching for things they don't need. So forgive them. Someday they will realize how much they truly need me. That is why I offer myself up now." Oh, how vast and deep is the love of God! Let us, like the tax collectors and sinners, run to Christ and pray, "We need you. Please help us." Then Christ will say to us, "Today you will be with me in the kingdom of God."