



# Community

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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*of Clarendon Hills*

**Individual, Pre-Meeting Devotion**  
**October 2019**  
**Theme: *Discerning God's Call***

### **Introduction to the Theme**

For our devotions last month we reflected on God's steadfast love in relation to the changing world, and considered how changes in society are impacting the church today. This is a time of important questions for the church. How do we fulfill our mission in Christ when the ways we've always done things don't work like they used to? What is God calling us to be and do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church? Furthermore, how do we discern God's voice above the cacophony of voices around and in us?

This month we'll reflect on discerning God's call. Some of us think of "call" only in terms of a pastor's call to ministry, which is one aspect of call, but God calls all of us, repeatedly, to opportunities to serve God's purposes in the world. Through the Spirit, God speaks to us. But it's not always easy to hear God's voice, let alone to follow.

God's call is often mysterious, in both who God calls and how God speaks. We see throughout the Bible examples of God calling unlikely people, like Moses, a clumsy speaker, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt; or David, a mere shepherd and the smallest of his siblings, to become a great king; and of course Mary, very young and poor, to bear the Christ child. The list goes on. God calls unlikely people, and God also speaks in ways we are unaccustomed to. Through burning bushes, in a still small voice no one else can hear, at unexpected times, God speaks, and often with a call that pushes us out of our comfort zones. We shouldn't be surprised though. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," God told the prophet Isaiah (Is 55:8).

There is much that gets in the way of hearing God's voice and responding to God's call – fears, doubts, other agendas, and other voices, just to name a few examples. To be aware of those obstacles and notice them in ourselves is the first step toward the open hearts, minds, and wills we need in order to follow.

### **Spiritual Practice (Contributed by Fred Veenbaas)**

*As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. Matthew 9:9*

As we consider the concept of "call", Caravaggio's painting, "The Calling of Saint Matthew," located in the Contarelli Chapel in the church of St. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, provides fruit for reflection and insight. Take a moment to contemplate the painting and the questions that follow:

### The Calling of Saint Matthew-Caravaggi



#### Reflection

1. Notice the figures in the painting. What do their different postures and positions convey to you? How are they dressed? Do they look normal or are they idealized?
2. How does light play a role in the painting? What figures are illuminated?
3. What is happening in the picture? What are the figures around Mathew (bottom left) doing? How is Matthew reacting?
4. What is Jesus (top right) doing? Do you see anything over Jesus' head? Have you seen that hand pose before in any other works of art?
5. The Matthew 9:9 passage above is elegantly simple. Does that simplicity get expressed in the painting? Why or why not?
6. With which figure do you most identify?

#### About the Painting

"The Calling of Saint Matthew" is one of three paintings about Matthew situated in the Contarelli Chapel. All were painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. The paintings were the first major commission for Caravaggio. Just on its surface the painting is beautiful. The technique and skill used are remarkable.

The painting was completed in 1600, a time when the Roman Catholic faith was fighting back from years of losses due to the Protestant Reformation. This reaction was called the "Counter Reformation." The Church was looking for ways to become relevant to its members. This painting with its strong references to "Call" and even "Conversion" tries to engage the observer in those themes of reconnection.

The Figures: The painting depicts the moment of transition and spiritual awakening for Matthew, a tax collector. If you look closely at both of Matthew's hands, one is pointing to his heart while the other is still touching coins on the table. His face is showing surprise. The scene probably takes place in a tavern. Also notice that the figures at table are clothed in the style of the day while Jesus and Peter are clothed in the style of their day.

The figure of Peter is placed between us and Jesus. This reflects the attitude then (and now) that Peter represented the Church on earth and was the transition between heaven and earth. Two of the figures at the table are focused on the coins on the table. The third, a young man, is looking at Jesus.

The Lighting: The halo over Jesus' head signifies deity. Matthew's face is illuminated by a beam of light that appears above the head of Jesus. The light is a symbol of spirituality. The action taking place in the painting is defined by the path of light which travels from Jesus to Matthew.

The Action: In both figures the hand plays a major role in the action of painting. There are many biblical references to the power and influence of the hand in transferring grace to someone. The "laying on of hands" is still a powerful act that is used in our church today.

Why is this painting so significant today? The themes of "Call" and "Conversion" are as relevant today as they were in 1600. On its surface the painting depicts the calling of St. Matthew. Below the surface it is much more than that. The fact there are two different styles of clothing in the painting tells us that Caravaggio was trying to communicate the timelessness of a "Call." To an observer from that day the message should have been clear—Jesus is calling you! The table in the picture has an opening where the observer can place himself to be an active participant in this conversion experience. In addition the people at the table were normal looking, not idealized. That meant a call can be extended to anyone, not just the figures of the Bible idealized in the High Renaissance. Caravaggio's genius was his ability to communicate the fact that the stories of the Bible happened to common people just like us.

If you'd like to explore the painting further: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5AWuwoicfY>

### **CLOSING SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER**

Choose one of the call stories in the Bible (suggestions below\*) and read it aloud to yourself.

- What speaks to you?
- In what ways do you identify, or not, with the one who is called?
- What do you learn about God's provision for the called?

Name the ways that you ignore, resist, or miss God's call. Using either your own prayer, or by saying or singing the second verse to the hymn, "Open My Eyes" below, pray for God's grace in opening your ears to hear God's voice above your own and other voices that distract you from God's call.

Open my ears, that I may hear  
 voices of truth thou sendest clear;  
 and while the wavenotes fall on my ear,  
 everything false will disappear.  
 Silently now I wait for thee,  
 ready, my God, thy will to see.  
 Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

\* Sampling of call stories:

Abram, Gen 12:1-9; Moses, Ex 3:1-11; Joshua 1:1-11; Mary, Luke 1:26-38; Saul, Acts 9:1-31