

Feast of St. Matthew 2007

Text: Matthew 9:9

“As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in his tax collectors booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.” V. 9

Tonight we gather to tell some stories. From the earliest of days communities would gather to sit around a fire and talk about who they were, where they came from, and to look into the unknown as to who they might become. This coming together helped to forge their identity, helped them to bridge the past to the present and the present to the future.

Telling stories and remembering, is among the most important work a community can do. Telling a community’s story places that community into a shared history. Individual stories become community stories. Community stories become a people’s stories and on it goes.

It is an incredible gift to be a people of stories. We gather every Sunday to remember our place in the great salvation history. We remember that we are part of the story of Abraham and Moses, Sarah and Rebecca. We remember that we are a part, we are the living members of the continuing story of Joseph and Mary, Jesus and his disciples.

These are not just stories of events that happened long ago, they are our stories as we continue to live their lessons, seek their guidance, and take them into the future for other generations to know and pass on. We remember that we might re-member this community of faith. And so, it is very appropriate tonight for me to tell a story.

The date was Sunday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1938. Hitler had entered Austria to occupy it as part of his plan to expand his empire and develop his master race. The headline in the New York Times read, “Austrian Jews seek a parley with Nazi’s; Leaders plan conference with Seyss-Inquart to learn their future.” It was the beginning of one of the darkest times in history. It was a time when people around the world started to wonder if the Jews would have any future at all.

A young Austrian woman and her fiancé knew that the future for them looked bleak. The young man was of Jewish heritage by Hitler’s standards. Even though his family was not practicing, still, Jewish blood flowed in his veins. He would never be safe as long as he remained in Austria. He fled

over the alps, first arriving in Switzerland and then traveling to Cuba. The young woman booked a trip to New York to supposedly attend the New York World's Fair. In reality she was given a bracelet to take to a Jewish Viennese doctor practicing in New York. It turned out that this doctor had a cousin who needed a nanny to watch his children. The young woman, who was a kindergarten teacher back in Austria, jumped at the chance to do so as she began to try and figure out what she could do and where she could go.

One day, about two or three weeks into her stay, she needed to go to the office of the Refugee Committee to register with them and to ask their help in finding a sponsor so that she might remain in this country. She had the address of where to go but did not know how to get there. She stopped a woman on a street corner in Manhattan and asked for directions. The woman suggested she take a taxi but the young woman told her she did not have any money to do so. The older woman looked at the address again and said, "That isn't very far away. I will walk you there." This woman's name was Mrs. Scott. By the time the two had reached their destination, she was so captivated by this young Viennese woman that she offered to sponsor her stay in America.

Mrs. Scott, the wife of a Presbyterian minister, asked the young woman to come home and stay with her, which she gladly did. The woman had a son in-law who was fluent in German and she asked if he would come over and help translate between herself and her new friend. The son in-law's name was the Rev. Mr. Harrison-and he was an Episcopal priest. After speaking with the young woman, he told her that he and his wife were looking for someone to watch their two small children, ages 3 and 1 and he offered her a chance to live with them and be the children's nanny. This was a position that she would later take.

At issue however, was that because she had arrived on a tourist visa and not as a refugee she could not stay in this country. The Refugee Committee told her she would have to leave the United States and re-enter as a refugee. To do so, she would have to travel to Havana, Cuba and stay for a while until such time as the paperwork could be completed and she could reenter the U.S. Arrangements were made for her and her fiancé to be reunited in Havana and married. They were married in May of 1939 and stayed in Cuba until the following September.

After they were allowed to return to America they lived with the Rev. Mr. Harrison and his family who were living in Hampton, Virginia.

The young man, an engineer by training back in Austria, worked on electrical motors there and remembered that some of the engines he worked came from the Century Corporation of St. Louis. Thinking he could get a job here, the newly-weds made plans to head west. The Rev. Mr. Harrison had a seminary friend who was rector of St. Peter's in the city. He wrote a letter of introduction and asked his friend to help this couple. The rector was able to secure a position as a maintenance man in one of the hotels as well as help them find housing. As the result of the kindnesses shown to them by Mrs. Scott, the Rev. Harrison and the rector of St. Peter's, this couple decided that there was no question but that they would become Episcopalians.

Let us fast-forward a mere 18 years from the time this couple escaped Austria. The couple, regular worshippers at St. Peter's, which had since moved from the city to Ladue, decided that in gratitude for their many blessings, they would like to start a new church. On the eve of St. Matthew, September 20, 1955, they and two other couples meet in one of their homes to discuss how to form a new community to proclaim the gospel.

Out of the evil of Hitler, out of the chance meeting on a street corner of a young woman from Austria and a woman from New York City, out of sharing the witness of Jesus Christ with one another, and out of the love this couple had for God and each other, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church was born.

Would we be here tonight praying together, receiving the Body and Blood of Christ together, looking into our future together, if it wasn't for one act of kindness, one person willing to take time out of her day to help escort another person she did not know to a place she had no idea she would visit?

Would we be here tonight if the Gospel was not spoken between these people and lived out in their daily lives? Would we be here tonight if this couple thought that they could be privately thankful rather than publicly thankful? No.

We stand on their shoulders. We are a part of their history and their story. Their individual story became our community's story. So it is here tonight that we remember this story so that we might re-member our future.

We are very blessed tonight to have that young Austrian woman with us. We are the benefactor's of her faith and her experiences. And it is to Anne Brauner and her late husband Ernest, that we owe a debt of gratitude we cannot possibly repay except perhaps with our love and our continued witness to St. Matthew's future.

It is to that future that we look towards tonight. What stories will be told of us 50 years from now? What will the community's memories hold of our time here? We cannot know, but we can plan. We can look to our future in Jesus Christ together in hope because we know the plans that God has for us are more wonderful than we could have for ourselves. God will use us if we are open to the letting the Holy Spirit guide us. God will use us if we are open to taking the time to prayerfully find out what God wants for and from us.

Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. With courage, we can and will do the same.

Amen.

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