

The great conversation: Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

You may share an experience I often have: I enter a room where friends are engaged in a spirited conversation about someone and try to guess who it is that they are describing. If I succeed, it's usually because they are referencing words or actions that I recognize as familiar. These words and actions form a pattern that I associate with a particular person.

One of the great gifts of the biblical canon, and therefore of a lectionary that helps us hear the fullness of the canon, is that it brings a range of voices into conversation with one another. Today we enter the room where the apostle Paul and the evangelist Matthew are already having what we might call a spirited conversation. Our task as observers is somewhat simpler because, as so often in the Bible, the conversation is about God and the ways of God. Paul describes the seemingly impossible promise God made to Abraham. Matthew tells stories about Jesus in Galilee, each of which involves an unusual command. Would you like to listen in on their conversation? There's no reason not to. Paul assures us that the words of scripture were written for our sake also.

If we had entered the room earlier, we would have heard Paul in Romans 1 describing how we can partly know the invisible God by looking at God's creation. The power of God and the very Godness of God are evident when we simply observe what God had made. Now Paul wants to take the argument a step further. Here he is concerned with the "whoness" of God—with God's character. Paul insists that God is both trustworthy and powerful enough to save us from sin and death. God's trustworthiness is shown by the fact that God makes promises and keeps them. God's saving power is shown by the fact that God creates out of nothing and raises what is dead to life. God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, our parents in the faith, testify to God's faithfulness. Paul tells the story from Abraham's point of view. "Hoping against hope, he believed" God's promise that he would become "the father of many nations" even though he was 100 years old and in spite of the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

Paul tells us, “He grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Therefore Abraham’s faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Paul insists that these words from Genesis 15:6 were written not for Abraham’s sake alone, but for ours also. Moreover, from the phrase “he grew strong in his faith” we learn that faith is not only a gift from God, but also an aptitude that grows with use: we learn how to be faithful in the process of trusting God. Even if we think we have very little faith, by living into the faith we do have we can watch God increasing our faith and watch ourselves growing stronger in faith, as Abraham and Sarah did. What Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* once said about hope applies equally to faith: it is about “trusting God in spite of all the evidence and then watching the evidence change.”

The evangelist we call Matthew may have been telling a story like that on himself when he described the call of Matthew the tax collector. His journey of learning to trust God began with a single step. Sitting at his tax booth, he saw Jesus walking by and heard his command, “Follow me.” That’s all. No explanations, inducements or incentives. Just the strange command, “Follow me.” For reasons that he probably never fully understood, Matthew got up and followed him.

He wasn’t the only one. Many tax collectors and sinners followed Jesus. When the religious leaders challenged his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered them first with a proverb, then with another strange command. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” The phrase “have no need of” is instructive in its ambiguity: does it mean only that the religious leaders are healthy? Or does it subtly suggest that because they despise a doctor showing mercy to those who are sick, they themselves are not well? The unusual command suggests the second: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Jesus sends them back to scripture (Hosea 6:6) to learn the ways of God. He aligns himself with God’s mercy when he adds, “I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.”

The third strange commandment is given to the hemorrhaging woman who drew on every ounce of courage she had to touch the fringe of Jesus’ cloak, trusting that somehow she would be made well. Jesus commanded her to “take heart, daughter,” and pronounced that her faith had made her well. Instantly, she was made well. God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” here worked the raising of a little girl from death and called forth wellness from a woman

in whom it did not exist.

An impossible promise? Three strange commands? Who is this God? In each case, God's faithfulness calls forth faith in human beings like us. Paul and Matthew invite us first to listen in, then to join in the great conversation about the even greater God who is its subject.