

## I Am With You Always

### Introduction:

Good morning. First off, I would like to say to everyone here that it is exciting to be up here to speak to you today. By the looks of you guys, you look more excited than me. Maybe it is because Scot is not up here. I guess I finally got him to be quiet for once, and you know how much he likes to talk. I mean I have to spend everyday with him, while you guys just hear him on Sundays. Since he has done the talking for so long, it is now my turn. Scot said I could go as long as he does, so if I could have one of the deacons to lock the door, we can get down to business. I am only kidding. I'm very excited to be up here and very blessed that you have given me this opportunity to serve and to grow here at Chelmsford. Believe it or not, I have learned a lot from many of you, and I am looking forward to the rest of the summer I have here with you guys. So let me say this again, I am thrilled to be up here so I can just express my gratitude and excitement in witnessing some of the things God has done for me in my life. As we get into the lesson, let me first share a little about my story about God.

### My Story:

My story begins in Manchester, NH back in 1997. I was 13 years old, and from what I understand my parents were having a little trouble, as do any parents, in raising a teenage son. *Now that I see my parents over there I am going to edit some things today, so they won't know everything I hid from them all these years. I am still afraid of them. No, I am very happy they are here; in fact don't let them leave without saying, "Hi" to them.* Anyway, after some of the trouble and grey-hairs I gave my parents, they decided the best thing for me was to get involved with God.

I can remember one of the first experiences I had with God and His people was with the youth group at Manchester, NH. My parents thought that the annual Fall Youth Retreat up at Gander Brook was a way for me to get connected with the church. Me, on the other hand, thought that I could get out of it. You know how kids think they are so smart, that if they push enough of their parent's buttons they think they can get their own way, or so I have been told. I guess I was one of those kids. Well, I thought I had them. I pressured them, pleaded with them, and begged them not to make me go to this retreat. In my mind, I pictured myself with a bunch of happy-go-lucky Christians around a camp fire, singing Kumbya while holding hands. I thought Christianity was only for the mindless, and those who were too lonely to have a friend. So in order to fill that void of loneliness they created this Jesus fellow to be their friend.

Well, my parents caved in, not to me, but they caved into God, and sent me on my way to Gander Brook. From there, I discovered a whole new world, of which I am still trying to understand to this day. I saw people from all different social backgrounds, loving one another. That was what originally attracted me to Christians: **the love for one another**, as corny as it sounds. And that love I wanted, I wanted it from the other teenagers, and I wanted it from the adults I saw there.

After that retreat, I became active in the youth group. I thought, "Hey these guys aren't half bad, maybe I will let them be my friends." Week after week, I nearly went to every teen activity that my new friends went to because I was so HUNGRY for their love

and attention. I was even dunked into water because out of my ignorance I knew that my new friends wouldn't still be my friends unless I was baptized. I also knew if I was going to have a chance with any girl at church, I had to be baptized.

Even though I appeared to be living this newfound Christian life, I was still the same old Joe. Sure, I was trying to be nicer to my parents, smiling to strangers, and going to church every Sunday, which are all wonderful things to do, but I still was not trying to walk with God.

I can remember, being up at another Teen Retreat at camp years later, and just hearing and feeling the invitation of Jesus. From right there I knew I had to start listening to God. I gave my life over to God on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2001 at the Edgewood Church. And that was and is still an important day to me. And I hope your day was important, and that you don't forget your day and how important it was and still is. Since then, Satan has come knocking on my door louder than ever, but what's even better is that I have joined with God who has been waiting for me for a long time.

And that's one part of my story that I wanted to share with you right now, and this morning I want to share with you another story. I want to share with you a story that both reminds me of my story and yet challenges my story. I want to share with you Matthew's story.

### **Matthew 9:9-13: (NIV)**

9As 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. 10While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" 12On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'<sup>[a]</sup> For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

### **Illustration: (PowerPoint)**

I love this picture; I think it speaks for itself. I love this picture so much that it is my new background on my computer. This piece of work was done in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century by an Italian artist by the name of Caravaggio. As were many of his contemporaries, Caravaggio was commissioned by the church to create artworks showing famous biblical stories. This one in particular is the story of "The Calling of Saint Matthew." When Caravaggio painted this work, I like how he depicted the tax collectors and sinners as contemporary Italian merchants. I think if I had to create this work, I would have added some interesting people.

And over here, you notice Jesus, and this stream of light that is flooding through the door. I also love this scene right here, Jesus is pointing to Matthew, and look at this guy's face over here, thinking, "Who Matthew—the tax collector, the thief?" In fact, I bet you noticed Matthew looking down, probably thinking that he wasn't worthy enough to follow Jesus, or maybe he was too absorbed in his money.

Interesting enough, the church that commissioned this work refused to pay this Caravaggio, because the tax collectors and sinners weren't dressed like religious people of that day, but rather in everyday, contemporary Italian dress. "It doesn't look religious," the critics said. The painter replied, "Our Lord loved and called to him the common people. That is the Lord I paint."

Isn't that ironic. The very story that shows that God looks for the person's heart, and that God has no social requirement for discipleship, when represented in art, it created the same controversy as it did in Jesus' time. Because these people don't look religious, they can't represent God and his story.

### **Observation:**

I have always enjoyed this story of Matthew's conversion for some reason. Maybe, because of the way Matthew just drops everything and follows. Whenever I read this passage I think of it as the climax of a movie. I can see Matthew, a man who has been longing for a change in his life, who has been waiting for some excitement to come his way, who has the Holy Spirit working in him, see this man Jesus from a distance. Maybe he has heard Jesus speak before, or maybe he has just heard of Jesus. Evidently though, there is something that gets Matthew's attention. I can see as Jesus approached Matthew, the movie violins start. The closer Jesus gets to Matthew, the more dramatic it gets until Jesus speaks those famous lines: "Follow Me." Then I can see Matthew also instantaneously getting up and leaving everything, leaving a table full of money, and a life full of earthly treasures, to follow this man from Galilee.

After accepting Jesus' call, the Bible tells us that Matthew throws a party for his new master. From the text, you can see Matthew as yearning and wanting something good for his corrupt friends. And that good was for his friends to meet this Jesus. I can see Matthew as wanting so much more for his hurting friends. Matthew wanted his friends to find what he had just found. I mean Matthew didn't even go to Harding University or take any evangelism classes. Rather he just loved his friends, and he knew he had to figure out how to show Jesus to them.

On hearing this, the Pharisees were irate. So as you know from the Bible, a Pharisee was a person who was trying to be separate or set himself apart from the unclean things to God, which in itself is a beautiful thing. The Pharisees practiced amazing spiritual disciplines in order to seem pleasing and holy in the sight of God. If you think about some of the spiritual disciplines this group practiced, such as tithing, and fasting, you can begin to think about how committed some of these men were to the Law. But instead of growing in love toward God and other people, the Pharisees became self-centered and focused on the accomplishments of their disciplines.

The Bible doesn't give us many details of this confrontation except that the Pharisees got wind of Jesus' action and didn't like them. They apparently thought that Jesus and His disciples were glorifying God the wrong way, so they challenged Jesus for socializing with such unsavory characters. To a good religious person it was scandalous to keep bad company. It is quiet interesting to see the Son of God, the Savior of the world, Immanuel to be with tax collectors and sinners. What a strange crowd!

So the Pharisees confronted him and questioned Jesus on his choice of company. And I can picture the newly converted Matthew listening in and wondering if he had done the right thing. He sees the Pharisees chewing out Jesus for the party Matthew had

thrown. I can only imagine what is going through Matthew's head. *Maybe, I should have brought my friends to the temple, or man, I sure got Jesus in trouble, or I knew they would not have accepted my new friends.*

And you know Jesus' response to all of this? Jesus defends Matthew's actions and his friends. What I mean to say is that Jesus is not defending the actions of Matthew's friends but rather, Jesus is sticking up for the people he loves. Jesus wants to be their doctor. He loves humanity so much that he would risk his reputation forever to be a friend and doctor to the sinners just so he can have a relationship with His people.

As I look at this story, I am reminded of another part of my story. I see Matthew looked down upon by society, but still a man after God. When I look at my story, I can relate to the calling of the riffraff, Matthew. If I had to look at what I was 5 years ago not only would I have not wanted to be seen in public with the old Joe, I wouldn't even want the old Joe to be in my church.

But what draws me more into the calling of Matthew is what Matthew did with his story. Since Matthew loved his friends so dearly, he thought by sharing his story he could get them to Jesus. From my own story, after I became a Christian I started to separate from my friends. I mean I needed to separate from some friends in order to stay on the right track and begin to develop my faith, but the rest of my unchurched friends I left anyway. I left them because I thought that they could never be the religious type. And I thought that my friends could never be accepted by God like I was.

Earlier I said that love is what attracted me to Christianity, and to think that I wasn't sharing this love with my friends. And why? Because I thought it was a waste, I thought they'd never listen me, I thought I would be laughed at or taunted or ignored. I also thought in the back of my mind that my church friends would never accept them. Oh how foolish I was, that if God would have accepted me of all people, he wouldn't accept my friends? And hey I've got to tell you, if Paul says he is the chief of sinners than I am second-in-command!

Looking back at my story, I regret the lack of love I had for my friends. Instead of relying on God's power and God's story, I relied on my instincts and what I thought was best for my friends. I was too caught up in my own life and caught up in wanting to perfect my story, that I forgot to do what Matthew did. Matthew got involved in other people's stories.

This morning, I know that you all have your story, and if your story is like Matthew's please share it. It is a testament and encouragement to see that some of you have trusted God enough to step out of your comfort zones to share your story and God's story to the people around you whom you love.

But for those who's story is like mine, there is hope that your story can change - even today. Let's look again at the words of Jesus.

### **Matthew 28:18-20:**

<sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in<sup>[a]</sup> the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is the conclusion of Jesus' story, right before he goes up into heaven.

Look at that last verse, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” A lot of the time when I feel that I am wasting my time or that I won’t be accepted, or in danger of damaging my reputation, it is because I have forgotten this last verse. Sure, I know that I am called to be apart of other people’s stories, but I seem to forget the comfort our Lord has given us in the promise that he will be with each and everyone of us forever.

If your story is like my story and you have hurting friends whom you love, get involved in their stories and remember the words of Jesus:

**Surely I am with you always...**

**Joe Winbigler**

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