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Who Are You Hanging Out With?

Luke 5:27-32

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Last week we heard from Luke 5 about a man who was forgiven and healed thanks to the faith of his friends who brought him to Jesus. Jesus proclaimed to his critics and to all in the house that he had *“authority on earth to forgive sins.”* The formerly paralyzed man got up and walked out of the house carrying the mat that he had been carried in on. *“Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen remarkable things today.”* That brings us to this morning’s scripture as Luke continues:

**“After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of **Levi** sitting at his tax booth. **“Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.****

Then **Levi** held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples,

*“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”*

Jesus answered them, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (TNIV)**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this story. In Matthew’s Gospel, the tax collector’s name is Matthew. In Mark and Luke, it is Levi. Same guy. What’s in a name? Sometimes a lot. Listen to what two Old Testament passages have to say about the tribe of **Levi**.

Deuteronomy 18:1-2 says, *“The levitical priests, the whole tribe **of Levi**, shall have no allotment or **inheritance** within Israel. They may eat the sacrifices that are the Lord’s portion but they shall have **no inheritance** among the other members of the community; the Lord is their **inheritance**, as he promised them.”*

In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi 2:4-6 quotes the Lord of hosts saying, *“Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with **Levi** may hold, says the Lord of hosts. My covenant with him was a **covenant of life and well-being**, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. **True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.**”*

Listening to those two scriptures, can you hear the irony that the gospel says there is a tax collector named Levi? Levi was not a priest with no inheritance but the Lord (Deuteronomy); he was a tax collector who extracted money from others so he could take care of himself. Levi didn't stand in awe of God's name (Malachi); he was a tax collector whose lips spoke *extortion* not true *instruction*. His life lacked integrity; he was crooked, and walking in the path of iniquity. To say Levi failed to live up to the spiritual heritage of his name is an understatement. Yet Jesus calls a tax collector who had no spiritual qualifications or virtue, to follow him. Sometimes we can think that Jesus calls people to follow him because they are so wonderful, we imagine the first disciples were spiritual giants – not when Jesus called them – they became so from being with Jesus. More often, most of the time, Jesus calls folks to follow him because their lives in less than pristine condition and they need to learn from Jesus how to live life well as God intends. This is certainly the case for Levi.

Jesus didn't pick the most religious, the most virtuous, or most popular or powerful people in Galilee to follow him. He didn't go to a school and recruit the students that had demonstrated the greatest promise, personal holiness or faith. This is good news for most of us. Jesus built his movement from the castoffs of society. He called toll collectors like Levi, saying, "*Follow me.*" The invitation of Jesus is pure grace. We don't deserve it. The invitation of Jesus is also a summons, we can only respond to it on Jesus' terms. We learn what it means to say "yes" to Jesus in how Levi accepts the call.

First, he **got up**, left everything, and followed Jesus. The verb **to arise** is the same one used in verse 25 to describe the action of the man who had been paralyzed. I think it is safe to assume that Levi had heard about what Jesus had done for the paralyzed man. The same call that lifted the paralyzed man from his mat lifts Levi from his toll station. Both events are examples of the transforming power of God in the life of a sinner. The call of Jesus can reach us no matter what our circumstances.

Levi, a well off man, is met by Jesus who invites him to an entirely different life in which God's care for the oppressed, the imprisoned, the poor, and the blind heads the agenda. Earlier in Luke 3 when John the Baptist was preaching about the need for people to bear fruit worthy of repentance, people kept asking him, "what should we do?" It says in Luke 3:12-13, "Even **tax collectors** came to be baptized and they asked him, "*Teacher, what should we do?*" He said to them, "**Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.**" Levi got up to a whole new life that included living with integrity and honor.

**Leaving everything** behind doesn't mean Levi gave away everything he had; he still has money but now how he uses it has changed. Leaving everything means he is abandoning his past and his old life, his former thought patterns and motivations, giving himself completely to following Jesus. Earlier in Luke 5:11, Jesus said to Simon, James, and John, *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."* Levi knows how to catch people – he reels them in by inviting them to a party at his house.

Jesus and the disciples are there hanging out with all of Levi's lost friends and business associates. The other people at the party, including Levi, are called "sinners" by the Pharisees and their scribes. The Pharisees and scribes couldn't stand toll collectors like Levi, nobody could. In the Roman Empire, residents were subject to poll taxes, road and bridge tolls, taxes on merchandise and what we would call property taxes. Sound familiar? Fortunately for us, we have the IRS, but in Jesus' time the job of collecting taxes was usually sold or given to a wealthy and powerful person who then in turn divided an area into districts with chief collectors who in turn hired locals to go out and get the money for district taxes like the poll tax and land tax. Many tolls, tariffs, and custom fees were collected at toll houses or tax booths like the one staffed by Levi. Unlike today, the whole system was set up for and full of corruption because any money collected above the amount to be sent to the government stayed with the tax and toll collectors. Men like Levi were despised not only for their financial oppression, but the element of treason for working with an occupying army of foreigners against their own people as well as the ceremonial impurity of working with people who weren't Jewish.

Can you begin to understand why tax and toll collectors were viewed as sinners? Sinners were those people in the community who broke the law of Moses in such obvious ways that it was known in the community and they were excluded from the synagogue because of their behavior. To be excluded from the synagogue was to be an outcast.

Yet we know of Jesus' acceptance of tax collectors and sinners **because he eats with them**. In Luke's Gospel, **Jesus always seems to be on his way to or from a meal** – usually with outcasts and those viewed as sinners (see Luke 7:29, 31-34; 14:1-24; 15:1-2; 19:1-10). (This is why we have a pool party and cook out for new members!) Luke 7:31-35 tells us that many people rejected John the Baptist and Jesus because of their eating habits. **John ate with no one and Jesus ate with everyone!**

The absolute scandal of this scene in the eyes of religious people was that Jesus called for and modeled a style of **befriending sinners rather than staying away from**

**them. Jesus sitting around a table eating and talking with sinners and befriending them is the model for the lives of his disciples and the church.** Following Jesus consists not in isolating ourselves from the mess of the world, but in being in the world and engaging it, befriending people who, like ourselves, are also sinners, although maybe in different ways.

Somehow Christianity has taken the tradition of a Savior who came to seek and save sinners and have developed a style of church life based on separation rather than friendship. When it comes to relationships, it is easy to live in such a way that all our friends are people who are already following Jesus. We can spend our time in safe, holy huddles, but in doing so we can almost become like the crowd we heard about last week whose presence made it difficult for others to actually get to Jesus. Now I am not saying we shouldn't get together with other believers or with friends, of course, we should and I enjoy doing so. I spend most of my time with good Christian folks, I just don't feel as badly about it as writer Mark Twain did. (Mark Twain announced that after having spent a lot time with "good people" he could understand why Jesus preferred to spend his time with tax collectors and sinners.) We also need to spend time with folks who are not yet following Jesus.

The Pharisees and scribes were people like many of us – committed to God's law, good morals, and ethical living. They were offended that Jesus did not requiring repentance **before** he would eat with toll collectors and other sinners because at the time table fellowship meant full acceptance of another.

Notice in the text that the criticism of Jesus is directed to the disciples. Perhaps this is because the church, Jesus' disciples, was criticized for its inclusive table fellowship which to some people seemed to condone the behavior of tax collectors and sinners. Notice also that the answer comes not from the disciples but from Jesus. The church finds its defense for its behavior in the example and words of Jesus.

Jesus responds with a proverb and a statement of purpose for his ministry. Jesus speaks of two kinds of people: the well and the sick, the righteous and the sinner. Jesus is clear about whom he has come to call. In a sense, Jesus says, *"Let's pretend everyone Levi invited, including himself, has a terminal illness and I have the cure. Wouldn't it make sense that the person with the cure would get close enough to the people who are sick to apply the cure?"*

Jesus makes all of us who hear this exchange decide for ourselves – *"Which category am I in? Am I well or sick? Am I totally fine without Jesus? Or am I person who*

*struggles with sin who needs forgiveness, and help in living a life of purpose, love, and joy?"* The choice is up to us. We judge ourselves. Am I at the table, grateful to be welcomed by Jesus, Levi, and the rest of the sinners, or am I among the critics who cannot condone what Jesus is doing and who want no part of associating with the kinds of people at Levi's party? Am I in close proximity with anyone who doesn't yet have a personal relationship with Jesus or am I like salt that never gets out of the saltshaker?

Generally, I don't add salt to anything I eat with the possible exception of fried clam strips, but you could have a ton of salt but it won't do any good, it won't flavor any food unless it is in close proximity to it – like touching it. In the same way, Jesus says, it is the sick people who need the doctor's touch and wisdom. How are we to take to other people the potent life-changing message that Jesus forgives our sin, gives us new life, and invites us to follow him if we're not close enough to others to apply the cure? In a tongue in cheek kind of way we can say Jesus ate good food with bad people so he could impact their lives, what about us?

The question the Pharisees put to the disciples is a good test for our faithfulness to Jesus' mission: if righteous and religious people are asking why we are associating with unclean, unwanted, undesirable, ungodly people – by whatever name – then perhaps it means the work Jesus began is continuing in our midst.

Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Luke adds the word "repentance" at the end of this encounter. **Luke uses the word repentance more than any other New Testament writer.** Jesus befriends us, affirms us, and loves us where we are, but Jesus also challenges us and calls us to enter into a way of life as his follower that has very high ethical expectations that will mean changes for us all.

A number of years ago a woman in our church who I cared about very deeply was upset and wanted to talk with me. Without getting too specific, basically she asked me if people dealing with a certain type of behavior could join the church before they had conquered and totally overcome that behavior. I told her that if we didn't let folks join the church until they had conquered all the sin in their life, there wouldn't be anyone here including me! She wasn't happy with my answer and eventually left the church which really made me sad because she is a terrific person, but she couldn't accept what I think Jesus is saying.

Jesus calls us to repentance and repentance is both a gift and a demand. It is a gift because in it there is the possibility of new life and new beginnings. It is a demand because there will be things we need to stop doing, change how we're doing, and start

doing, but, and this is the key, **more often than not this is a process not a once for all time moment and Jesus calls and eats with folks before any repentance has been expressed or demonstrated.**

Levi's life changed forever when he left everything and followed Jesus. He repented of his way of life and like the Levites of old, he no longer had any inheritance but the Lord It was an unfolding journey for him as it is for us.

As Levi walked with Jesus and his life changed from the inside out, he went from being crooked and deceitful to fulfilling the meaning of his name so the church ever since could say of him,

*"True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips.*

*He walked with us in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.*

If Levi is another name for Matthew as we suppose, then the tax collector comes to reverent awe and stand in awe of God as Malachi says, and his name is associated with the first gospel in our Bible. How fitting, how appropriate, that the first book in the New Testament bears the name of one of whom we can say, *"Well if Jesus invited even a guy like Matthew to be a disciple, I guess I can be one too."*