

The last couple days, I was with my dad at his 65th college reunion at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. He got to see some longtime friends. Before going to Colby, we spent Thursday night at our cottage in Maine, and we got to visit with Ricardo Pena and his wife, Ulyana. I had not seen Ricardo since 1982! His parents and my parents have been close for over 50 years and I saw Ricardo a lot when we were children, but I hadn't seen him since I was a senior in high school. The two of us ended up talking until after 1:30 in the morning and it was great catching up. I also had a little time yesterday to visit with two college friends of mine, Lisa and Denise, who were juniors who lived right next door to me when I was a clueless freshman. They befriended me and looked out for me like two kind and fun older sisters. It was great to see them again. The people we hang out with and become friends with greatly shape our life experience, don't they? And we impact theirs as well.

Two weeks ago, 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, *Luke 5:27-32* (TNIV):

"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.'**"

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's Levi. Same guy. What's in a name? Sometimes a lot. Listen to what two passages from the Hebrew Bible have to say about the tribe of **Levi**. *Deuteronomy 18:1-2* (NRSV) states, "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 Hebrew Bible, 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 about Levi, can you hear the irony of there being 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 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 that we know of, to follow him. We might think Jesus calls people to follow him because they're wonderful, we imagine the first disciples were spiritual giants—but they weren't when Jesus called them—**they became so from being with Jesus**. More often, Jesus calls folks to follow him because their lives are 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.

Think for a moment about all the friends you've made in your life. In every case you were strangers to one another and would have remained that way unless and **until someone took the initiative**. Someone had to say, “You can sit here if you want.” “Would you like to work with me? Would you like to go for a walk? Want to play on our team? You can stay at our house.” What we see in encounters between Jesus and people is sometimes people take the initiative like the four friends of the paralyzed man, and sometimes Christ takes the initiative, but someone has to do it. And today, that someone is you and me. When a person takes the initiative the other person still has the power and the opportunity to say, “No, thanks,” or “Yes.” Levi could have said “No,” to Jesus' invitation, but he doesn't, and 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. The call of Levi happens immediately after the healing and forgiveness of the man on the mat, so Levi surely knew 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 financially 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 (see *Luke 4:16-21*). 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*** (NRSV), "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 friends and business associates. The other people at the party, including Levi, are called "sinners" by the Pharisees and the 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. 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. 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 because of the element of treason for cooperating 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 when Fred and Mary Downs were part of our church, we'd 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 modeled and called for 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 engaging with the world; 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, of condemnation rather than hospitality. When it comes to relationships, it's easy to live in such a way that all our friends are people who are already following Christ. We can spend our time in safe, holy huddles, but in doing so we can almost become like the crowd we heard about two weeks ago whose presence made it difficult for others to get to Jesus. I'm 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 of time with "good people" he could understand why Jesus preferred to spend his time with tax collectors and sinners.) However, we also need to spend time with folks who are not yet following Christ.

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 require repentance before he'd eat with toll collectors and other sinners because at the time table fellowship meant full acceptance of another. In the passage, the criticism is directed at 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. 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. Christ is not about building walls to separate people; he's about building a bigger table.

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, "Imagine 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 want no part of associating with the kinds of people at Levi's party? Jesus says, it's the sick people who need the doctor's touch and wisdom. How are we to share the 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 and loves us where we are, but Jesus also calls us and challenges us to enter into a way of life as his follower that has very high ethical expectations that will mean changes for all of us. Jesus calls us to repentance, and repentance is both a gift and a demand. It's a gift because in it there is the possibility of new life and new beginnings. It's a demand because there will be things we need to stop doing, change how we're doing, or 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 invites 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. He also develops new friendships that shaped the rest of his life. 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 what was stated in *Malachi 2:6* was true of him: **“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.”** If Levi is another name for Matthew as we suppose, then the tax collector comes to revere and stand in awe of God as *Malachi* says, and his name is associated with the first gospel in our Bible. How fitting 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.”

Jesus took the initiative with Levi. Levi took the initiative with the people he knew. What about you? Who are you hanging out with? Who are you spending time with? Who are you taking the initiative with in your circles of relationship? When was the last time you threw a party like Levi and invited folks from your neighborhood as well as perhaps some friends from Church? Why not consider throwing a Levi party? You could even call it a Levi's party and tell folks it's casual and to wear jeans?

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. In being called to follow Jesus, what needs to change in Levi's life? What does he need to give up? What does he need to “take up” and start doing?
2. Why are integrity, uprightness and truthfulness important to God (see *Malachi 2:5-6* and *Luke 3:12-13*)? What does a lack of these qualities reveal about a person?

3. Where do you find yourself in *Luke 5:27-32*? Which character(s) do you most identify with in Levi's house and why (Levi, Jesus, sinner, Pharisee, disciple, teacher of the law)? Would other people agree with your self-assessment or not?
4. Are you in close proximity with anyone who doesn't yet have a personal relationship with Jesus? What can you do to help bring Christ closer to that person(s)?
5. Who can you invite to a meal who doesn't know Christ personally or attend BBC? It can become easy once we become Christ followers to spend most or even all our time in a "holy huddle" with other believers. How can you be intentional about making time for your neighbors and others who have not yet become disciples of Christ?
6. Who can you talk to about teaming up to plan a block party, cookout or potluck supper in your neighborhood or where you live?