

Luke 5:27-32
A Banquet of Sinners
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
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Jesus Christ came into this world to redefine what it means to be truly human. As I said last week, if we can imagine ourselves somehow transported to that place where the three members of the trinity reside, and there imagine how the conversation went: “What are we going to do about this people who we lovingly created, but who has fallen away so tragically?” And there Jesus raises his hand and says, “What if I could go and be with them and enable them to see and know what we mean when we call them sons and daughters?”

So Jesus of Nazareth steps into our reality, showing us why it is we’re here. Why are we here? That’s a question we all ask in one way or another, especially this time of year when we resolve to make changes about ourselves. But it is also an important question for a church to ask: why are we here? For what purpose do we exist? It’s important to ask because sometimes we get it wrong.

I want to read a little parable about someone who got it wrong. I heard it this week; it’s called the Moth in the Church Carpet.

There was a moth who had his home in the sanctuary. He lived long and happy, for the place where he had his home was between two tacks in the carpet in an obscure angle where the stair ascendeth up to the pulpit. And it would have been difficult to select a finer place of abode for moth of sedentary habits and he never ever wandered from his fireside but whitened the corner where he was. That is he never wandered from that place until the time when this chapter begineth and this chapter is not a long one and there will not be any chapters after this one, for that moth is there no longer. And the place that knew him knoweth him no more.

This moth was serenely happy for the carpet was fuzzy and it was the very best food a moth could want and the brushes of the janitor came not nigh him. And the moth listened to the music of the organ and he thought the music was for his edification. And he heard the sermons and the prayers and for all he knew he thought they were for him. And he lifted up his eyes and behold there were yards and yards of carpet, stretching down long aisles through the length of the nave. And he looked unto the right and to the left and there was carpet under the uttermost transepts of the church and he had a goodly heritage. But he waxed fat and grew conceited, and he said, “Go too now, I will explore my heritage, for all of this is for me and for me it has all been created.”

And he crept out of his corner and ventured down the center aisle, and when he had gotten out about an inch, behold the janitor came along with a vacuum cleaner and just what happened unto the moth he hath not clearly defined in his own mind. For he was sucked up with a strong wind and pulled down a hollow

rod and blown down a rubber tube to an iron pipe into a vat in the basement. And as he lay there, he meditated. The janitor came and opened the vat, scooped the dust and hurled it into the blazing fiery furnace, and the moth was in the dust when this occurred. And the history of that moth from that time on containeth nothing of importance. But there seldom was a moth whose future prospects were more encouraging than that moth at that time, if he had not gotten a swelled head and thinketh that the entire establishment existed for his enjoyment.

Now the person who thinketh that the universe exists for his convenience would better stay in his little corner of it, for if he getteth out where important things occur, something is likely to happen to him or his theory.

What is the church? A building, a program, a mission agency? All of these notions fall tragically short. Luke the gospel writer has perhaps the most robust view as he narrates the beginning of the church's life. The church is a movement, it's a group of people alive with the Spirit of Jesus Christ in their lives. How does this happen? Luke writing in Acts 2:42 tells us that there is a gravitational pull that draws people en masse, and they gather at a table. The followers of Jesus devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread, and the prayers. They broke bread together and day by day their numbers increased. But, if you roll back the tape even a bit further, back to part one of Luke's writing, the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus preparing the community that would be birthed at Pentecost. Jesus, in Luke's gospel, is assembling the team around the table. Not only is he gathering them, but he is also equipping them so that they will know how to respond when the time of Pentecost comes.

For the next 8 weeks, we are going to look at these table encounters that Jesus had with people. Because what we will find is that in many instances as Jesus instructs us, he is actually turning the tables on our understanding of ourselves and others. Jesus' movement of forming people and communities in his image begins, in many cases, around reoriented tables.

This morning, we are going to look at Jesus' core convictions in inviting people to the table. The table is a place for spiritual formation, life-changing community and lay leadership, and I would invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 5 verses 27-32.

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

The beginning of this global revolution we know as the church begins with this first conviction: Jesus changes lives. Spiritual formation, the taking of a life that is going in one direction and giving it a new trajectory, will be central to Jesus' ministry then and now. We see this in Jesus' call of Levi, or Matthew as he is also named elsewhere. Levi, we know, is a tax collector. But if we probe a little deeper, looking into his name, it's possible for us to learn a little more about this call. Levi is a name that has deep roots with God's people, in the Old Testament. If you remember the Levites, the priestly tribe, they were the ones who were responsible for leading God's people in worship and in the daily offerings of sacrifice to God in thanksgiving and supplication. So it's possible that Levi's parents had high hopes for their boy, that his name would be a benediction for his life. Maybe he would one day grow up to represent the people in worship.

We also remember that the Levites did not own any property, no land was given to them in Canaan, but rather they were supported by tithes of a generous people. Ironic, how far Levi has fallen, for he is not living off of the tithes of a generous people, but off of the taxation taken from the people. Even though he may have been raised hearing the stories of the Torah, even though he may have had an ambition to follow in this path, his life didn't turn out as he may have wanted. Instead of residing in the temple, keeping the story of the living God alive, leading them in worship, he finds himself sitting in a toll booth on the north shore of the sea of Galilee, skimming off the livelihoods of his fellow countrymen. It's possible that Levi knows something about a life of unrealized hopes. Things didn't go the way he wanted them to, and so now he's jaded. Now he sits as a Roman representative, with a Roman sword by his side, despised by his fellow Jews as a robber, burglar, an extortionist, a sinner.

Here comes Jesus. Jesus sees the tax collector, not just with his eyes but he looks into his interior and sees the hurt, the disappointment, the sadness. Jesus walks up to Levi and sees what he has done to make his living and he says not, "You brood of vipers," but "Follow me. You, Levi, follow me."

Jesus came to call. At the end of the text today, it says that's what he came to do. And we'd expect that Jesus was here to gather the righteous, but he does just the opposite. "I've come not to call the righteous but the sinful. Levi, I've come to call you. Follow me."

Isn't it amazing how brief this encounter is, and yet the transformation that takes place in this man's life is mind-boggling? We want to turn transformation into something a lot more complicated than it is. Maybe for Levi, and maybe for you and me, it is just as easy as this, hearing Jesus call and then turning to follow him. Jesus doesn't lay out the contract with all sorts of fine print, there's none of that. Jesus knows this is a man whose life is in need of a change, but he says, "Levi, come with me—we'll work out the details as we go."

But what about repentance? Luke addresses it, but it's not for Levi. You see, Levi knows, it's for the Pharisees. Have you ever been around someone who has been given the amazing gift of freedom, or release from some form of inner captivity? They know that

the reorientation is a gift. You don't have to convince them to repent. Luke will address this later in Acts when says that repentance is a gift; it's not a precondition, or some sort of obligation for the work to begin. Repentance is a gift. But for Levi, Jesus simply says, "Follow me, don't learn the system, or the philosophical arguments, or the apologetics. Learn me; follow me." This is what it means for us to begin this process of Spiritual Formation, Spiritual Formation is simply this: follow Jesus and imitate him, enter into relationship with him.

The core of our church is to make disciples of Jesus, and we do this by imitating him, by following him. John uses the image of abiding in him, in John 15. Paul will talk about it with the image of childbirth, that we are being spiritually formed through relationship with him.

The second way that Jesus turns the tables is through life-changing community. In this church community, we are seeing more and more examples of people drawing one another into this journey of walking faithfully with Jesus. Whether it is through daily and weekly study of the Word together, communities of people of similar age and stage, gathering to support and encourage one another at the challenging times of life. Wabash Presbyterian Church is a branch shooting out from the vine of Christ that is bearing fruit. And you know what happens when plants that bear good fruit grow in our midst? People are drawn to them. When we find places where good food and nourishment are available, people in our spiritually and physically malnourished society come in droves. This is what the church can be.

But the challenge, and if you are an introvert like me it is particularly difficult, that the way to grow and thrive and be nourished in Christ is in the context of community. This is the Pharisees' beef with Jesus. "We're ok with what you're saying, but the people who you are welcoming into this are not our kind of people. We're good with ideas of spirituality and the notions of God's transcendence, as long as it can remain comfortably within our little worlds."

In this story, the Pharisees don't object with Jesus, but with the followers. "Why do you eat with these people, why don't you just keep your hands clean and follow Jesus?" But what Jesus will tell us later on, when he's gathered with his disciples in the upper room, he'll say, "You didn't choose me, but I chose you. I've invited you, I've gathered you." So when we follow Jesus, we'll be seated next to him with a group of his friends. We're going to be seated next to those who are not well, like we're not well. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Those who are well are in no need of a physician, I've come to heal through community with one another. Where I replicate myself in them, where I heal them, where I reveal myself in them, through this meal that I will share, and I have shared with you over and over again."

Jesus time and again throughout the gospels is turning tables, to borrow a phrase from theologian Miroslav Volf, from places of exclusion to places of embrace. He's turning tables from a place where we merely consume calories, to places where we are built up in every aspect of our being. He's turning tables from the destination of the deserving, to the

invitation to the outcast, where lives are transformed by eating this meal hosted by Jesus. He's taking his invitation to follow, and letting it play itself out through us. Notice, who throws the party? It's Levi. It's Levi's party. He hosts it because his life is being changed by Jesus.

When we follow Jesus, we will find ourselves with one another around tables in community. Now as we gather around this table, remember we come not because we're worthy or deserving, but we come as guests who are invited to come and follow him.