

Church in the Wild Pastor's Devotional
January 14, 2018

Let's continue to trail "Jesus on Mission." Today we read about a tax collector named "Levi;" he's the same man who re-named himself "Matthew" when he wrote about it story in his own Gospel (Matt 9:9-17). Apparently, Levi took this new name because the Greek word "Matthew" means "disciple." Levi truly wanted to be known as Jesus' disciple! **Please read Luke 5:27-38.**

Following Jesus required Levi to give up being a tax collector for the Roman Empire. He walked away from serious money and power. Following Jesus also required Levi to stop his participation in cruel injustice, self-isolation, and unhealthy indulgence. Here's why: Jewish tax collectors used Roman soldiers to compel the conquered population to pay for their oppression. Tax collectors added an (excessive) "service charge." Not surprising that Jewish tax collectors were shunned by religious Jews. Tax collectors often escaped their loneliness through unhealthy indulgences—over-eating, over-drinking, and exploiting desperate women.

In calling Levi away from such wickedness, Jesus restored him to joy-filled living—what God intends for everyone. He gained the opportunity to have a personal relationship with Jesus. By journeying with Jesus, Levi was also restored to authentic community, a fellowship in which men and women relate in gracious, God-honoring ways. He joined other disciples in learning to live as brothers and sisters, loving and forgiving each other. Not surprisingly, Levi wanted to share Jesus with friends who also needed to experience our Lord's gracious, redemptive presence.

No wonder that Levi's first act as a Jesus-disciple was to throw a Jesus-party. He "held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them" (In the next verse the ultra-religious Jews referred to "the others" as "sinners"). Notice these distinctive aspects of this Jesus-party:

- It's un-compartmentalized! Levi doesn't keep his sinner-friends separate from his Jesus-fellowship friends, Levi uses hospitality to bring them together. Knowing that Jesus will be gracious to his friends, he arranges for them to experience his grace and truth.
- Food and drink were enjoyed in a healthy manner. We know from the story of Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) that Jesus and his disciples fully participated in Jewish celebrations. They partook of rich food, good wine, and wholesome dance. Yet following Jesus also protect disciples from over-indulgence and reckless behavior.
- Amidst such fun, participants discussed Jesus' gracious and truthful teaching, often with life-changing effect. In Luke 19:1-10, Zaccheus (the chief tax collector of Jericho) had a powerful conversation experience after festive table-talk.

In the following verses, religious leaders criticized Jesus for enjoying himself with sinners. Jesus explained that the arrival of God's grace and truth was cause for celebration, even if the force of God's joy rips the fabric of religious tradition.

As *Church in the Wild*, we experiment with how to end our compartmentalization. Some of us have been stuck in church ghettos. Following Jesus requires learning to hang out with non-religious people. Others of us tend to keep our Jesus-friends separate from our non-religious friends. At our worst, we've lived double lives. Now we're learning to honor Jesus and bless people as we discover creative ways to host "Jesus-parties"—festive celebrations that mix our religious and non-religious friends (So far, our groups have experimented with simple meals, cookouts, block parties, and a "margarita party").

Of course, the frequency of substance abuse requires us to be care-full when throwing parties. I recommend Hugh Halter's booklet, Happy Hour: Etiquette and Advice on Holy Merriment (I've given many copies away). Here's a link to get it yourself: <http://hughhalter.com/books.htm>