

Calling of Levi
February 10, 2013
Luke 5:27-32

27After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." 28And he got up, left everything, and followed him. 29Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; 32I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

There's a knock at the door. You open it. A messenger has an invitation for you. "Levi requests the honor of your presence at a great banquet at his home tonight."

"Well this is unexpected," you reply. "What's the occasion?"

"Levi is leaving everything to become a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth."

"What? Levi? Is this some kind of joke? Has he gone mad?"

"No joke. He said this is the sanest thing he has ever done. He is a changed man and he wants to share his joy."

"Will this Jesus be there?"

"Yes and his other disciples will also be in attendance."

"Since when do rabbis associate with tax collectors and sinners like us?"

"I'm just trying to deliver a message here – if you want answers come and see for yourself."

"This I have to see..."

Anyone who knew Levi had to be curious. Levi was a tax collector...he handled Roman currency...he worked for the Romans...he took money from his fellow Jews, gave Rome its due, and pocketed the rest. He was hated and despised so he found friendship among other tax collectors and sinners... He was unclean, unwelcome, unlovable, and unholy according to the scribes and Pharisees. Then along comes Jesus and Levi is a changed man. I know I would go to the banquet just to see how such a thing could happen.

Lynn is my husband's cousin who is now in her forties. Every Christmas, as extended family gathered, we got the updates on Lynn's progress through medical school, residency, and her specialization in pediatric psychiatry. When she finally completed her education she received job offers from all over the country. She accepted a prestigious job offer, made great money, paid off all her loans and then announced to her family she was going to become a nun. She moved in with six elderly sisters, living in an impoverished neighborhood, working for a modest salary at an adolescent group home. My mother-in-law worried she was being sucked into some kind of cult. It sure made for an interesting family Christmas gathering. Celebrating Christ's birth is one thing but look out if you should choose to follow Jesus in a way that runs counter to values that our culture says we should pursue with all our might.

Lynn sent out invitations to family when she officially became a novitiate of this small order. Family members were mystified by her decision. She chose to be celibate and childless. She chose to stop practicing psychiatry for two years while she completed her religious education. She chose to live in poverty and in community. She chose a life of service. She chose Jesus. She chose to celebrate – even with those who couldn't fully comprehend her decision.

Clara Wilson is a 92 year-old, life-long member of this congregation who is not physically able to come to church. She remembers the day when a group came to the church for a revival. She was just a young girl, perhaps ten or so. As she was telling me the story she fumbled around in a newspaper rack next to her chair. She pulled out a song book, yellowed with time. It fell open with well-rehearsed ease to the song that touched her life all those years ago at that revival, "I Choose Jesus." Clara was born and raised in the church but this song, "I Choose Jesus," marks the moment she gave her life to follow him. It wasn't a big dramatic conversion like Levi but it was a decision that guided her steps from then on. Clara chose Jesus.

Today we are recording our service for Lloyd Pace. Lloyd lives at the Veteran's Home in Denver, Colorado, close to his daughter. Lloyd is one of those guys born into a loving Christian family. I don't know if there was that one moment when he chose to follow Jesus but I do know it is a choice he makes each day. When Lloyd was here, you might catch him here early in the morning caulking the backsplash on the kitchen counter or repairing dinged up trim. You might catch Lloyd sitting at the bedside of a dying friend. You might catch Lloyd passing out gum to all the kids who loved to call him grandpa. You might catch Lloyd taking communion to someone who couldn't get to church. No matter when you saw Lloyd he had it on his heart to share Jesus. That hasn't changed. He wants nothing more than for those who are floundering and lost to choose Jesus and be transformed by God's redeeming love. Lloyd chose Jesus and the difference it made in his life is the good news he wants to share, even as he struggles to speak. Lloyd didn't have one big dramatic conversion – he has daily conversions as he chooses Jesus over and over again.

When I was thirteen I went to see the movie, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon." I had no idea what it was about. What I did know was that there was a naked man in the movie. That was how my sister sold it to me. It turned out to be a movie about St. Francis of Assisi. I don't even remember if I knew the movie was based on a real person...but it captivated me. I was a church kid. I went to Bible camp. I made my confession of faith and was baptized. But this movie opened my eyes to something much bigger.

The movie tells the story of Francesco Bernadone, the spoiled son of a wealthy textile merchant. He is forced to return home from fighting in a war because of a terrible fever. Lying in his bed he is tormented by visions of his despicable behavior. In his recovery, he begins to find God in the midst of poverty and nature and poetry. He tries to return to his rich spoiled lifestyle but he can't. He sees for the first time the humanity of the slaves dying the fabric and making the textiles that made his family wealthy. He refuses to take over the family business and follow in his father's footsteps. No one can figure out what has happened to him. His father drags him to the Bishop and publicly humiliates by beating him in public. That's when Francesco gets naked. He renounces his noble name and removes anything and everything associated with his former life. He walks out of the gate of the city naked and free. He leaves everything...he chose Jesus. There are still many today who follow the Rule of St. Francis: to observe the holy gospel of Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without property, and in chastity.

That movie marks the first time that I realized that following is different from believing. Following is active. Believing is passive. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not something you believe – it is something you live – and it changes you.

Francis' friends were mystified by his conversion of heart and mind. It challenged them to consider their own shallow, self-serving existence and they began to discover they wanted more for their lives and they found it in giving their lives away in service to others. They chose to follow Jesus. What at first seemed like insanity became the only thing that made sense.

There is a song in our Chalice hymnal called, "I am the Light of the World." It is one of those songs that I carry with me. The chorus says, "I am the light of the world. You people, come and follow me. If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be." You people – come and follow me! "Follow me," Jesus says to Levi. "Follow me, Lynn and Clara! Follow me, Lloyd and Francesco! Follow me and learn what you were meant to do and be! Follow me."

Jesus' invitation isn't just life-changing it is life-giving. See what love can do! Jesus has already accepted us! That alone is enough to change us – but it is in following that our lives are shaped by love, that our decisions are influenced by Jesus, that our purpose becomes clear.

Every week I stand up here and offer an invitation, but now I am starting to wonder if I have been clear about what I am inviting you to do. I say, "If you would like make your confession of faith or reaffirm your faith I invite you to come forward." That's what I say – but what I'm asking is; are you ready to choose Jesus? Are you ready to say yes to his invitation and are you willing to follow him wherever he leads? Are you ready to be changed? If you are, come up here and tell the world you chose Jesus.

I know it would surprise the socks off me – just imagine your friends and co-workers? Perhaps you could throw a party to celebrate.

Speaking of parties, let's get back to Levi's great banquet. The gospel writer, Luke, only tells us about those who choose not to attend. Luke tells us the scribes and the Pharisees are complaining and grumbling about the company Jesus keeps. Well I'm sick of their complaining. I'm sick of the complainers and cynics getting the last word.

I'd much rather spend my time at the party and hear Levi tell his story – the story about how Jesus can save a wretch like me. I'd much rather hear how rising up to follow Jesus is the most terrifying and exhilarating decision someone can make. I'd much rather see Levi laugh and smile because he is in the company of Christ. I'd much rather see the dumb-founded amazement and curiosity of Levi's friends as they pull up a chair to the table to taste and see that the Lord is good. I don't think I would complain or even find it odd that Jesus is eating with such a hodgepodge of people – these are the very ones he came to love.

"So, are you coming?" the messenger asks.

Of course I'll go – not only to the banquet – but wherever he wants me to go. I choose Jesus. What about you?