

Luke 5:27-32

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Text: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk. 5:32).

Levi, sometimes known as Matthew, had all sorts of power given him by the Roman government to collect money for taxes. Levi had all sorts of power. He could collect the poll tax from men ages 14 to 65 and from women ages 12 to 65. People had to pay the poll tax simply for the privilege of existing. Levi collected a ground tax which demanded 10% of all crops grown and 20% of all wine and oil. Then there was the income tax which exacted 1% of a person's annual income. (Compared to our annual percentages that's not too bad.) A tax was imposed upon the main roads, the harbors, and the markets. Levi could extort them in any of these locations in his district. A tax was also imposed upon a cart, each wheel on it, and the animal used to pull it. There were sales taxes, import and export duties, and many more ways to receive money. One popular method was to force a person traveling down a road to unpack belongings and charge whatever seemed appropriate to the apparent wealth of the traveler. All in all, nobody knew exactly what their taxes were. It was kept a secret. Levi had to collect at least the legal amount and whatever more he could rake in was his own to keep.

Levi had a lot of power, but his status in society was on the same level as that of a robber and a murderer. Then, one day, something remarkable happened to Levi. He was sitting at the tax office when along came this man Jesus who simply said, "Follow me!" and he left everything and followed him. I have questions about this wondrous event. In fact, these same questions apply to most of the other disciples who were working at their tasks, living with their families, and basically caught up in the daily routines of their lives when along comes Jesus who says, "Follow me!" Did Levi know him? Had he studied this man? Did he do a background check on this wandering carpenter from Galilee? There is no apparent evidence that Levi ever laid eyes upon him before that day at the tax office. And then he, like all the others, left everything, and followed Jesus the Christ.

The story does not end there. We will come back to it later. It gets even better. But for now I have another story. It is a story about an entire nation sitting in the tax office waiting. It is a story about a people who have been accused - perhaps rightfully so - of being morally bankrupt. It is a story you and I are living each and every day. For those of us who claim to be "good" folks a survival instinct has set in. We have begun to tunnel in in order to weather the storms around us, but the storms will not go away. Jesus walks by the tax office every day and says, "Follow me!", but it seems precious few are willing to respond. Not enough to stem the tide. The ironic part of this story is that the people have been given a lot of power to do good and yet, in many cases, choose to remain powerless to touch the world with healing hands and lead the masses to God's household of love. The Rev. Duncan Littlefair from Grand Rapids, Michigan, stated rather roughly this truth about our people today. *"You go on holding beliefs because you don't think much. You believe in the church, but you don't go. You believe in the bible, but you don't read it. You believe in God, but you act as if you didn't."*

Strong societies tend to be morally and ethically capable. In order to be morally and ethically capable we have to be forever diligent to the will of the Divine. I'm going to share with you a message written by Chris Hughes, former editor of "Youth!" magazine:

*"Do what you want. That's right. Do what you want. Not that you need my permission. That's how we operate. We do what we want, not what we know or what we think. I know that riding roller coasters makes me sick. But I ride them anyway because I want to. I know that speeding is against the law, dangerous, and wasteful of fossil fuel. But I often do it because I want to get where I'm going as fast as I can. I know that junk food and soft drinks are filled with useless calories and that I 'defile the temple of God,' which is my body, by over-gorging myself. But when I want nachos, I **want** nachos!..."*

He goes on to say:

*What do you want? What is the deepest desire of your heart? It is God's deep desire that you would be a whole, fully human being. But what do **you** want? It is God's deep desire that you know and experience unconditional love, hope, and a sense of worth. But what do **you** want?"*

I remember a joke told to me a few years ago which goes like this. How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb? Only one, but the lightbulb has got to *want* to change. We can tell by reading the story that Levi wanted to change. We can only guess the reason why. Maybe he was tired of being in the same class with robbers and murderers and despised by all. All in all, Levi participated in a new power. He had the power and desire to choose to be a follower of Jesus Christ and when the opportunity presented itself he seemingly jumped at the chance. From then on Levi entered into a most amazing grace probably far and away from his wildest dreams. In Christ's presence he was being forgiven. In Jesus he found acceptance. With God he let go of his old power of collecting and extorting taxes and was handed new powers of love and forgiveness.

The most remarkable part of this story, I believe, is not so much Levi's acceptance of Christ, but his immediate ability to wield his new found power. Levi seemed to take Jesus' teachings seriously, because the first thing he did was to sit Jesus down to a feast at his house. Levi became the servant to the master. Next thing he did was to have seated with Jesus more tax collectors and sinners. Levi was bringing them to the good news. Levi was willing to share with them a most amazing grace which he himself had found and now he had the power to share that with others.

Off on the sidelines we have the good old Pharisees with their scribes murmuring against Jesus' practice of not only sitting down with sinners, but eating with them as well. Yuk! Can you imagine? Jesus was breaking the law and eating with the unclean people who were not even allowed in the temple. Jesus was going beyond the lines of acceptability. Meanwhile, Levi was growing fond of Jesus. And who are we participating with today? Do we have the power to condemn or to give grace? Are we spiteful modern Pharisees or loving disciples of Christ? Are we sick in the sin of judgement and self righteousness or healed from our spiritual disease and living in the amazing power of God's grace? We have the power to choose and Jesus calls us to be free of the chains which bond our lives. The joy of his ministry was not to call the righteous, but to heal the sinner. The great biblical scholar Walter Russell Bowie adds a warning for us who claim to do Christ's work today. *"Whenever the fellowship of Jesus as expressed in the Christian church lets that supreme motive [that is, joyfully healing the sinner] it is no longer Christian."*

Remember Aesop's fable about the wind who wagered with the sun that he would be first to force the little man walking down the road to take his coat off. The sun, being good natured, agreed and allowed the wind to try first. The wind blew and blew, but the more it tried the tighter the man clutched to his coat. When the sun's turn came it shown brightly and warmly down on the man and with a little gentile persuasion and an all around warm feeling the man took off his coat and folded it over his arm. Levi had many powers he held over the people of his day which many people in our day would truly envy. He gave it all up to be a part of God's life giving grace, because that's what he wanted. He wanted to be a part of the warmth and light of God's gentile persuasion. I hope what we want as a people, as a church, as individuals, is to be truly amazed by the life God has waiting for us and be a whole and complete part of God's gentile persuading. It is far more than the power we have to make life happen for ourselves. Borrowing, again, from the words of Chris Hughes who says, *"Whatever you do, do life. Choose to be all God created you to be. Don't settle for anything less. If you want to, choose to honor your Creator. Choose to be God's person, on purpose and with passion. Let's do life together."* I couldn't agree with him more. Amen.