

## THE RISK OF EVANGELISM

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I have observed, lately, that people very often reject a life of faith—particularly Christian faith—because they equate that faith with distortions or caricatures that they see on television or have experienced with other people. It's not so much that they reject Jesus, but they reject a caricature of Him.

On my own quest to encounter Jesus in a fresh way, I think I have found something very important about Him: He was not welcomed in the religious community. I find that Jesus is not very religious, though He did see Himself as authorized by God to bring forgiveness, healing, and wholeness to people. This means that those who worked overtime to keep their religious structures intact, found Him to be a threat to their sense of safety and tradition.

Yet, Jesus was very much welcomed by those who were considered irreligious. There was something in Jesus they responded to, that connected with a deep place inside them. Jesus' willingness to spend time with those people often surprised them, while it scandalized the religious observers.

My quest took me to Luke 5:27-39, NRSV:

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 he got up, left everything, and followed Him. Then 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. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Then they said to Him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

Right away, I am astounded by the way Jesus invites Levi (also called Matthew) to join Him. It's important to remember that Levi was a tax collector, who collected tax revenues from his fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman government. Most people considered him a self-serving mercenary. Typically, tax collectors made money by collecting more tax than was required and keeping the excess. So Levi was considered to be outside of traditional "righteousness" and God's favor. He was a true "sinner"—not one wrestling with normal

human failure, but one intentionally ordering his life around wrongdoing.

Jesus knew that Levi was a tax collector. Yet, He simply says to Levi, “Follow me”—not, “Tell me you’re sorry,” or “Ask for forgiveness,” or “Shame on you,” just, “Follow me.” Then Luke says that Levi “got up, left everything, and followed him.”

Jesus’ call, “follow me,” occurs a number of times in the four gospel accounts. It seems to be the primary way that Jesus invited people to connect their lives with His. Jesus’ call suggests that He was going somewhere—after all, people were to follow Him.

For many of us this invitation seems too easy. Sometimes people keep Jesus at arm’s length because they don’t feel as though they can give Him everything they’ve got. I can relate to that, can’t you? Yet Jesus’ invitation is simply to get up from what you are doing and follow Him—go where He is going, be where He is, to engage in relationship with Him.

Luke says that Levi “left everything.” We might think that Levi just abandoned his entire life, except that in the very next scene Levi is having a banquet at his own house in Jesus’ honor. So the “everything” that Levi left was what he was doing with his life. His focus was on himself and the way he manipulated people around him. Apparently Levi was good at it, because he had a big house and could afford to throw a banquet.

When Levi responded to Jesus’ invitation, what did Jesus do? Jesus went to Levi’s big house—the big house he got by ripping off his

fellow Jews—and enjoyed a big banquet, hanging around with Levi's no-account friends. It's no wonder that the religious leaders were upset. Wasn't Jesus just endorsing the lifestyles of these people?

When questioned by the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus told them that He had a purpose in spending time with Levi and his friends: He saw them as living their lives outside of God's love—outside of God's goodness, His righteousness—and He came to call them back. Jesus came to heal them from the sickness of their own lives.

Are we getting this? Jesus went to the people who needed Him the most. He looked at the least qualified of the people in His community—people whose lives clearly demonstrated they didn't deserve any good thing from God—and He invested Himself in them so that they might get well, that they might be restored to God.

How wrong is that? Didn't Jesus understand that God doesn't like bad people? Didn't He know that the nicer you are, the more religious you are, the more on-track you are, the more God likes you? Apparently not. He made it his intention to get the “sinners” lives all over Him. He put Himself in the middle of their lives and shared His own life with them.

Do we understand what kind of person Jesus is? Jesus is the one who goes where there are people who live as though there is no God, and destroys His own reputation and safety by bringing His life right into the middle of theirs. Jesus was clearly seen by people as a healer. What they didn't seem to expect was that He came to heal hearts and lives, as well as bodies. So, He went where the

brokenhearted people were. He went to people who saw themselves as hopeless in God's eyes. He came to make them whole people, who would come to be swept up in the wonder of God's love.

The religious leaders, once again, threw a fit over this. They kept picking away at Jesus, constantly looking for something to criticize. They asked Him why His disciples didn't fast and pray like the followers of John the Baptist. They may have found John to be offensive, but at least they liked the ascetic lives of his followers.

Jesus now begins a series of rather puzzling statements. In response to the question of the religious leaders, Jesus compares Himself to a bridegroom and His disciples to a wedding party. In the Jewish culture, the time period surrounding a wedding was a time of engagement with one another, of celebration and activity. The context of these comments seems to suggest that the religious leaders were being sarcastic and referred to Levi's friends as Jesus' disciples. If that were the case, Jesus didn't hesitate to include them as part of His life.

This would have been scandalous to the religious leaders! A Jewish teacher—a rabbi—was responsible for his followers. If this wild group of people—eating, drinking, carrying on—were the equivalent of his wedding party, then everything Jesus was doing was suspect. Where were His religious practices in the eyes of the public? How did He expect to gain community favor by spending His time with and endorsing sinners and tax collectors? Jesus responds by pointing out that something new is happening.

Of course, new is often a big problem. If you live with others, try changing the furniture around before they get home. See how much they like the idea of new. If you manage employees, change their work habits and see how immediately thrilled they are. Change the order of a worship gathering sometime, and watch deep concern wash over the people's faces. It's human nature.

Years ago my wife and I knew a kindly old Methodist minister who felt things were getting a little dull in his tiny church. So, just before leaving on vacation, he decided to change the way they took communion. He was excited about it and found it personally refreshing. Upon his return, his church board had passed a resolution forbidding anyone for all eternity to change the way communion was done in that church. So much for innovation!

Jesus recognized this dynamic. He knew that His actions seemed new to the religious community. It was new because He had claimed He could directly forgive people's sins, because He brought physical healing to people, and because He spent His time in the company of people who were despised by "the righteous." Jesus understood that new was a threatening force to that which was considered old.

Here's what I think needs to be seen here: What Jesus brought was not something new in the sense that He invented it. What He did—calling people to Him, seeking to bring healing, speaking out forgiveness—was God's intention for humanity all along. Jesus' actions were offensively new in contrast to the old practices and systems of the religious leaders.

Religious systems are not necessarily bad things; it's when the religious structures and systems become the point, rather than the vehicle for connecting with God.

Jesus would not accommodate Himself to the religious system of the Pharisees and scribes. Their system kept them safe and kept others out. Jesus knew how people who were committed to their old systems responded to new things: they were like the ones accustomed to old wine; when they tasted something new, they said, "The old is good." The Greek that Luke uses here can also be translated, "The old is superior."

If we believe that Jesus is real—not just an idea or a historical shadow—then how does He interact with us? Is it by assessing us as imperfect, broken, or sinful, while waiting for us to measure up? Not this Jesus! This Jesus sees us for what we are and, in all of our weakness and failure, comes bringing us healing.

Does Jesus show the face of God? I believe He does. That face is not one of anger and dismissal, but one shining with love and desiring to draw people into relationship with Him. That is also the face I am able to bring to the world. When I engage the people in my world the way Jesus did, then I show them an aspect of God's character.

Jesus was willing to take on the label, Friend of Sinners. That is where the risk of evangelism comes in, because when we pursue evangelism by following Jesus' lead, any sense of personal religious reputation will be put on the line.

In an effort to learn how Jesus still does this, I began frequenting a local pub near my office. I tried to meet people there for business lunches and made it my habit to eat there at least once a week, learning the names of each person working there. I befriended one guy who is on a very serious spiritual journey. We began to get together for coffee, talking about life, God, yoga, relationships, and anything else that came up.

He suggested to me that we pull together some of his friends so that we might explore the “big questions” of life together. Within a few weeks he and his friends, along with me, my wife, and two of my friends, began having a weekly dinner at my house. The conversation wanders anywhere it wants—inevitably to places important to each person there. We continue to meet, and, sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, I can almost see Jesus enjoying the company and drawing people toward Himself.

This is not very “religious” activity. There is no Bible study, no evangelistic message, and no literature to peruse. This appears to be an invitation to enter the sacred space of God’s work, and I intend to watch each week for what He is doing. I am aware that my own reputation among my peers may be in question, since this is a pub-based set of relationships. I have come to believe that I have found Jesus at work there. It’s a work that I don’t want to miss.