

Jesus and New Things – The Risk of Evangelism

by Mike McNichols

I have been impressed lately with the observation that people very often reject a life of faith—particularly the Christian faith—because they equate that faith with any number of distortions or caricatures that they see on television or have maybe 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 am seeing something very important about him: He was not particularly welcomed in the religious community. What I mean is that the ones who worked overtime to keep their religious structures in tact found him to be a threat to their own sense of safety and tradition.

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

My quest has taken me to the gospel of Luke, chapter 5, verses 27-39:

"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 off the bat I find myself astounded by the way Jesus invites Levi (also known to us as Matthew) to join him. It's important to remember that Levi was a tax collector, which meant he collected tax revenues from his fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman government. Most people would consider him to be a self-serving mercenary, which he probably was. One of the typical ways for a tax collector to make money was to collect more tax than was required and keep the excess. So Levi was considered to be outside of traditional "righteousness" and outside of God's favor. He was one of the true "sinners"—not one who wrestled with normal human failure, but one who intentionally ordered his life around wrongdoing.

What astounds me is that Jesus had to have known that. Yet, he simply says to Levi, "Follow me." Not, "tell me you're sorry" or "ask for forgiveness" or "shame on you;" he just says, "Follow me." And Luke says that Levi "...got up, left everything, and followed him."

Jesus' call to "follow me" occurs a number of times in each of 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, so he must have been heading someplace.

For many of us this invitation seems too easy. Sometimes people keep Jesus at arm's length because they don't feel like they have the ability to 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 with him where he is, engage in relationship with him.

Luke says that Levi *left everything*. We might get the impression 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 the thing he was doing with his life. His focus was on himself and the way he manipulated people around him—how he got money out of them. 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? What kind of person did Jesus show himself to be? 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?

But when Jesus was 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. He came to make them whole people.

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—the people whose lives clearly didn't deserve any good thing that came 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, because 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 get what kind of person Jesus is? Jesus is the one who goes where there are people who live as though there is no God—as though they can live outside of God's love for them—and destroys his own reputation and his own 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 to where the broken hearted people were. He went to the people who saw themselves as hopeless in God's eyes. He came to make them whole people, ones who would come to be swept up in the wonder of God's love.

Of course, 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 himself 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 to be a time of engagement with one another, a time of celebration and activity. The context of these comments makes you wonder if maybe the religious leaders were being sarcastic and referring to the friends of Levi as Jesus' disciples. If that were the case, then 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 other people, try changing the furniture around sometime before they get home. See how much they like the idea of *new*. If you manage employees, change their system of work sometime and see how immediately thrilled they are. Change the order of a worship gathering sometime and watch deep concern wash over the faces of people. It's a human nature thing.

Many years ago my wife and I knew a kindly old Methodist minister who felt like 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. I don't know exactly what he did, but it was something different. He was excited about it and found it personally refreshing. Upon his return three weeks later, his church board had passed a resolution that forbid anyone for all eternity to ever change the way communion was done in that church. So much for innovation.

Jesus recognized this dynamic. He knew that what he was doing seemed new to the religious community. It was new because he had claimed he could directly forgive people's sins. It was new because he brought physical healing to people. It was new 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*.

He uses two illustrations to show his understanding:

* The first is a picture of ripping a piece of cloth off of a new garment in order to patch an old garment. There are two problems: The new garment is now damaged, and the new patch doesn't match the old garment. In addition, the inevitable shrinkage of the new patch will create a distortion on the old fabric. Everything will be wrecked if this happens.

* The second is a picture of new wine being put into old wineskins. In those days wineskins were made of the skins of small animals sewn together. The new wine would be put into fresh skins where it would ferment. The fresh skins had a certain elasticity that would allow them to expand to accommodate the fermenting wine. If new wine was put into old, already- stretched wineskins, then the fermentation process would not only burst the skins, but cause the wine to be spilled out. Again, everything would be wrecked.

Here's what I think I need to see here: What Jesus brought was not something new in the sense that he invented it. What he did—taking the initiative to call 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* of the religious leaders. The new things he did were a threat to the old comfortable, predictable, controllable *systems of religion*.

Religious systems are not necessarily bad things. They are structures that help people connect with a shared spiritual experience or understanding. I'm all for *organized* religion—just try disorganized religion sometime and see how you like it. It's *institutional* religion that is a big problem. 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. For Jesus to enter their system would be destructive all the way around. And Jesus knew how people committed to their old systems responded to new things: They were like ones accustomed to old wine; when they tasted something new, they said, "The old is good." From the Greek that Luke uses here that can also be translated, "The old is *superior*."

I am finding that Jesus is not very religious. But he did see himself as one authorized by God to bring forgiveness, healing and wholeness to people. He didn't do it the religious way—he didn't imprison people in a system that effectively forced them to qualify for God's love. He did it in the way of love—engaging with the broken, the disenfranchised, the outlaw. He refused to abandon these people for sake of religious convention. He was willing to take on the label, *Friend of Sinners*.

Actually, Jesus and the religious leaders agreed on something: The people Jesus spent time with were tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders were satisfied to stop with their assessment of the people—and their assessment allowed them to be superior. Jesus agreed with their assessment, but he also brought treatment, as a good physician would.

If we believe that Jesus is real—that he is not just an idea or an historical shadow—then how do we think he wants to interact with us? Is it to assess us as imperfect or broken or sinful, then stand back waiting for us to measure up? Not the Jesus we see here. This Jesus does see us for what we are and, in all of our weakness and failure, comes to bring us healing.

Is Jesus showing me the face of God? I believe he is. And that face is not one of anger and dismissal, but one that shines with love and the desire 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—Friend of Sinners. He is the one who comes to bring wholeness and health to those who live as though they are outside of God's love. That is where the risk of evangelism comes in, because when we pursue evangelism by following Jesus' lead, any sense of religious reputation will be put on the line.

In an effort to learn about how Jesus still does this, I became a regular at 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 became friends with 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 one of his friends and two of the waitresses from the pub began to join my wife, me and two of my friends for a weekly dinner at my house. During and after dinner we let the conversation wander anywhere it will go, which is inevitably to places that are important to each person there. We continue to meet, and I am watching God open up sacred space for these wonderful, searching people. And in 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, 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. But I have come to believe that I have found Jesus at work there. It's a work that I don't want to miss.

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