



From the Pulpit: February 6, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Luke 5:27–39

The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time, V: A Whisper Will Be Heard

During the season of Epiphany Bill, Katie and I are exploring Jesus' early ministry to see what we can learn about Christ-like virtue during this time of pandemic, racial-discord, and divisiveness. Borrowing a phrase from Reinhold Niebuhr who called Jesus the Impossible Possibility, this sermon series is called "The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time." Dining with those we disagree with seems particularly impossible right now, so I chose Luke 5:27–39 as our lesson for the day.

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[a] 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.'"

A few years ago the New York Times¹ published an essay called "To Fall in Love with Anyone Do This." The author used techniques from a research study, which claimed that if a couple answered 36 questions, then stared into each others' eyes for four minutes they would fall in love.

"For Levi, Jesus must be at the top of his list of potential dinner companions."

The first question on the list: "Who do you most want to invite to dinner?" If it is hard to come up with an answer to that question perhaps it is because the pandemic, or politics, or polarization shortened our lists of desired dining companions. Disconnection and discord are part of what makes this an impossible time to dine together.

For Levi, Jesus must be at the top of his list of potential dinner companions. There Levi is sitting at his tax booth, bilking his fellow Jewish citizens on behalf of Herod, when Jesus shows up. Maybe Jesus stares into his eyes with a withering or welcoming gaze, we don't know, but hearing just two words, "Follow me," Levi leaves everything and throws a dinner party. He invites his new friend Jesus and his disciples, his tax collector buddies from work, and a bunch of religious folks, too.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/style/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>

The appetizers are just being cleared for the next course when the Pharisees begin asking uncomfortable questions, “What are those people doing here?” Jesus answers, “I am like a doctor, here to change minds.”

The author of Luke uses the familiar Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*.

Then the questions get even more personal, even comparing the spiritual practices of Jesus’ followers to John’s and the Pharisees’. Jesus reminds them that because of who he is, his presence is worthy of celebration. Then in typical Jesus style he ends the conversation with a parable.

Meanwhile Levi the host has said nothing. Maybe he’s too busy making a mental note of who not to invite to his next shindig. What is the “everything” Levi left? Whose mind is being changed?

I heard inklings of a change of mind in Leon Cooperman’s story featured in this week’s Washington Post.² The article highlights the fairly non-extravagant life of a 78 year old billionaire hedge fund manager who is making money faster than he and his wife Toby can give it away. Born to poor immigrant parents he paid his way through college where he met his wife. They’ve pledged to give their wealth away, signing Warren Buffett’s giving pledge. Not too long ago he settled with the SEC on an insider trading charge. He receives a regular barrage of emails both accusing him of being all that ails our country and asking him for charity donations to keep the American dream alive.

“He’d always imagined himself as the rags-to-riches hero, only to find himself cast as the greedy villain in the story of economic inequality run amok.”

It was the title of the article, “Moral Calculations of a Billionaire” that hooked me. Perhaps because I am married to someone who spent two decades in the high-frequency trading industry before leaving it behind, I am curious about the questions Cooperman might be asking himself.

His moral questions arise out of interactions with people. When he drives his Hyundai past the food bank lines during the pandemic, he recalls a poem about inequality written by his granddaughter, who he describes as a “socialist type in favor of wealth redistribution.” His brother’s death causes him to wonder if sitting at his trading desk all day is the best use of his time. So he goes to speak to some low-income college students and sees that the path he took is a lot harder for the young people sitting in front of him to follow today. About his own wealth he asks, “What’s enough?”

Cooperman may not be leaving behind his 12 hour days at his trading desk but perhaps the questions he asks hint at some sort of change.

Twitter responded predictably to his story. Hedge fund managers, like tax collectors, are some of society’s favorite targets. An heiress launched a scathing, 20-tweet attack. How quickly comments and conversations devolve into politically charged shouting matches and Twitter tirades. We are divided and being divided. No one seems to change their perspective in a social media comment thread. But could they, or we, over dinner?

“When one part of our megaintellect is activated, they all must be defended.”

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/30/moral-calculations-billionaire/>

Journalist and policy analyst Ezra Klein researched the causes of growing divisions in America in his book, *Why We're Polarized*. Building on the work of other scholars he unpacks the idea of “mega-identity” where one single vote can indicate not just our political party, but our religious, gender, race, and geographic identities.³ When presented with negative partisanship, human instinct is to defend who we are. When one part of our mega-identity is activated, they all must be defended. This he argues is one reason we are more likely to build moats and silos than bridges.

Wordle is popular in part because it doesn't ask for any identification. There are no curated ads to entice us to buy something, no algorithms calculated to elicit anger about issues. Josh Wardle created it for his partner who enjoyed word games. It is quick and fun and somewhat of a bridge builder. Now that it has been purchased by a media company, many are wondering if it will become just another cookie tracking tool to leverage identifying crumbs for politics or profit. I hope not. Our family Wordle text thread gives us one daily common experience shared across the miles.

If Jesus was alive today, Levi's banquet of diverse guests probably wouldn't have happened. But dinner table conversations may be exactly how we begin to bridge the divides in our world. Klein's dives deep into the why of polarization while offering few solutions. But his suggestion that we “Rediscover a Politics of Place,” rooted locally more than nationally brings us, if not around the same table, at least nearer to one another. Proximity is an antidote to polarization.

Jesus comes to change our minds where they need changing, bringing us closer to God and one another in a divided world. Jesus shows up in our conversations.

Aren't we hungry for dialogue with others? “I want to know people who are different from me” is something I hear often in our Adult Education gatherings.

³ Klein, Ezra, *Why We're Polarized*, page 69.

You see the hunger for conversation in initiatives focused on gathering around the table. One, Heal America just released a film called “Breaking Bread, Conversations About Race.” Heal America was started in 2016 by Bishop Omar Jahwar after a Dallas gunman killed five police officers and injured 11 in response to the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile.

In 2018 the Bishop brought Alton Sterling's family and the widows of two Dallas police officers slain in 2016 together on stage to share their stories. They cried and found common ground. The Heal America Breaking Bread Project is rooted in the belief that for “America to heal, we must be willing to break bread with everyone, even those we disagree with.”⁴

Here is Jesus again, showing up at tables with unlikely guest lists. An impossible possibility in an impossible time.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield's career has been dedicated to finding common ground, to encouraging diverse people to share their doubts and loves. His book *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right* is where I first encountered the poem “The Place Where We are Right.” Rabbi Hirschfield says that the future of the world depends on the answer to the question, “How elastic is your narrative?”⁵ “Brittle narratives are those that are either/or, or wrong/right, with no room for doubt or the experiences of others. Elastic narratives allow us to hold them both, and of our experience with the experiences of our neighbors. Elasticity allows us to find common ground instead of trampling and destroying it.

⁴ <https://healamericamovement.org/about/#mission>

⁵ Hirschfield, Brad. “How Elastic is Your Narrative”, TedX, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUXhvrUHFw0>

“Jesus shows up in our conversations.”

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Jesus closes the dinner table discussion with a parable meant to stretch our narrative. No one sews a piece from a new garment onto an old garment—that makes both unusable. New wine in old wineskins will burst the skins. While Jesus is the incarnation of something new, the wine a symbol of God's present and coming reign, commentators have noted he still has a regard for the old. He isn't calling for the destruction of the old cloth or skins.⁶ In Christ we leave everything and put on a new identity, a garment stretchy enough to love and listen to our neighbors.

Jesus plows up our mega-identity-fueled beliefs based on our own limited view of the world.

What is Jesus whispering into your ear? A place to show up? The name of someone to invite to conversation? If that seems challenging, treat it like a first date. Coffee first then dinner if it goes well.

Do take care when dealing with people who seek to belittle or abuse you, remembering that changing hardened minds is Jesus' work. Our work is to be like Levi, to recognize Jesus when he shows up, to leave behind old perspectives and brittle narratives, and to invite folks to dinner.

Engaging in hard conversations the way of living in the world as someone who listens for the whisper of the divine. Jesus helps us to envision a world where these conversations are not unusual, it is simply the way things are, the way God intends it to be. And there amidst the clank of forks and plates, a distant whisper of a plow will be heard on the wind, a plow turning up the hard paths we've trampled transforming the soil into a field where peace and love flourish in the common ground.

⁶ Witherington and Levine, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary), page 154.

From dawn to dusk we long for you O God. We chase the slow-down, stillness and sturdy concentration, that connects us to you, that much more deeply. But even now we trust that our wild restlessness can just as easily tether us to you.

There is a stirring deep down, alluding to your presence. We will not be swallowed whole by today's worries. We will not be chased into a corner by today's troubles. You meet us unencumbered, unimpaired. Your liberation cuts through whatever binds us. At your divine kitchen table we find more love than the heart can hold.

Cut through the stillness, the wild restlessness, so that we might hear your call, and know you here amid the sacred silence of this sanctuary.

When we carry suffering and remorse; when we need forgiveness and reconciliation; when we long for a way through and a lighted path; when we cannot see the road ahead and long for hope, draw near. Be with us. Hold our fear. Overhaul our distress. Carry our burden. Mend our heart.

When loss is on the horizon; when something is missing; when what once was seems larger than what is, be near. Every breath a connection to you. Every heartbeat a sign of your incarnate presence.

When the world overwhelms; when wars and rumors of wars take center stage; when military exercises and peace talks become daily gossip; when refugees have seemingly nowhere to flee; when every global malady seems possible. Abide with us. Prompt us to be part of your lived peace. Show us your way, not our way. Balance stillness and action, balance talk and tactic. Turn us toward you.

And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us saying, Our Father.... Amen.