



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 4, 2018

Levi's Luau (Hope Restored Series)

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It was a most extraordinary luau. On the surface, it looks like any regular dinner party. Ah but no; this luau – this party at Levi's house—is a lot more because Jesus the Messiah is there and much controversy erupts. Let's read the Scripture passage for today.

Mark 2:13 Then Jesus went out to the lakeshore again and taught the crowds that were coming to him.

Mark 2:14 As He walked along, He saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed Him.

Mark 2:15 Later, Levi invited Jesus and His disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus' followers.)

Mark 2:16 But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw Him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked His disciples, "Why does He eat with such scum?"

Mark 2:17 When Jesus heard this, He told them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

It was an extraordinary luau in so many ways. First, there was no *kalua* pig because it was an ancient Jewish party. But maybe they had double order of *lomi lomi* salmon, *haupia*, fish, and poi or *pa'i'ai*. Second, this was Levi, of all people, throwing this party. Nobody liked this dude, but more on that later. Third, what a day for Jesus to go to a party since He has had a very long day.

Sometimes I think I can be hyper, or have high energy. At least my wife thinks so. But then I read today's Bible passage and I think Jesus is also hyper and also super energetic, so that makes me feel real Christ-centered.

Why do I think Jesus is the Energizer Bunny? Look at this schedule. Last week I preached on how Jesus is teaching in a packed-out house with the whole town of Capernaum there when four guys bash a hole in the roof where Jesus lives and lower their friend down and the friend gets healed. Busy intense day.

Then the Bible says after that, Jesus walks along the lakeshore and does more teaching. But He is not finished. Several translations point out Jesus finishes the same day with a party at Levi's house where He hangs out with them, and debates with the Scribes and the Pharisees, the bad guys of those days. They are from super conservative religious parties whose main purpose in life was to create religious law and enforce them. As a result, they were incredibly legalistic in that their law created more burdens on people than fellowship with God. What a day for Jesus!

You will notice that in the Bible Jesus never got mad at sinful people. Never. He only got mad at the Scribes and Pharisees—these religious people who were more into the religion of the rules, the regulations, and the rituals than in a relationship with God.

This is a warning to us. Don't get too black-and-white or too religious in our walk with God – meaning too much into strident legalism rather than the love of God. Be a good listener. Be a life-long learner. Be more civil and loving, instead of always pointing out what other people are doing wrong.

Jesus didn't get mad at people who mess up or who blow it in life. The SHOCKING thing we discover in the Bible about Jesus is that He is not the type to get mad at beer-guzzling, spouse-swapping, leprosy pus-producing, promiscuous, poverty-stricken people; or demoniacs, rich embezzlers, rude people, or, as one pastor said, the SOB's of life, which might have meant "sons of Baptists."

If you really read the Bible this is who Jesus is. He is loving, patient, and forgiving of sinful people. Spiritually mature followers of Christ are the same way. They are kind people; not scary people. People may think, "I don't want to be with Christians. They are prudes. They look like they just sucked on lemon."

Some may even think, "Oh, I don't want to be with Christians. They are so religious and spooky." But if you have been around really spiritually mature followers of Christ, you know that's not true. You will sense love, not rules; acceptance, not hate.

Billy Graham just passed away. I have stood near him at a conference, and he radiated love.

My friends who REALLY knew him say the same thing. I have been to his home, a log cabin, in Montreat, North Carolina. I met his wife Ruth there, and she was so accepting of me at a time my seminary was going through great criticism from religious leaders. I immediately felt her warmth and kindness. I even met their German shepherds, who were also loving and who responded to only German commands. Ausgezeichnet (which means *excellent*)! Danke schön.

Last year I was at St. Peter's Square in the Vatican when Pope Francis came by in his Pope mobile right near me. His smile radiated a welcoming warmth and love, not a feeling of "here comes a really religious, stick-in-the-mud, scary guy." Billy Graham, the Pope. That's enough name-dropping. Beyoncé and Bono told me not to do that. That's a joke.

As we get to know Jesus and grow in His spirit, we should be giving off an aura of love and acceptance and service. And certainly not prudishness. Not – are you following the rules? Are you obedient? Did you vote the right way?

So, let's really look at this passage to glean some important truths and challenges. Jesus sees Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at his tax collector's booth and says to him, "Follow Me." What is the significance of this?

First, Levi is known as *son of Alphaeus* because the gospel writer is trying to historically identify him for the ages. This is not made up. Second, Levi is a tax collector. It was one of the most hated, and I mean the most hated profession by the Jewish people. Tax collectors back then represented the pagan occupying forces of Rome, their oppressors. Tax collectors not only taxed Jewish people for Rome but also charged higher than what is required so that they could make a lot of money at the expense of their own people. They could decide the price to gouge the people. And that's why tax collectors were hated and disrespected.

And so it's baffling that Jesus would choose Levi as one of His first disciples. Levi, by the way, is also called Matthew, a Greek name he used especially when working with the Romans. He would later write the Gospel of Matthew mainly for the Jews.

Why are people incredulous that Jesus is hanging out with evil tax collectors like Levi? You see, if you hang out with these types of people, your own reputation would be tarnished. Levi is an outcast. He is hated. He is dishonest! He is corrupt. He is super sinful. To put it in modern terms, it would be like a guy who is GUILTY of colluding with Russians to change votes for our President. And then Jesus says, "Hey why don't you be on my team?"

You get how bad this is? "Jesus, are you crazy? This is the town sinner! You have now wrecked Your reputation."

You see, we can intellectually hear or read that Jesus accepts sinners, but when we see it in action, it's hard to understand and consent to.

The good news is that if you, or your friends, don't think Jesus would accept them, well, tell them to read the Gospel of Mark or any of the Gospels.

Jesus tells Levi to follow Him. This is no small thing. In the Jewish culture, people aspire to be invited by a rabbi to be mentored. It is a high standing in the community. It is a rare privilege. It's prestigious. Jesus was a rabbi, so when He says, "Come and follow me," He meant "I am choosing you to mentor. I will devote my life to pour Myself into you. I lend you My reputation."

Levi's self-esteem may have been so low that he would never imagine any rabbi thinking he is worth one pouring into the teaching of the faith. He could become a rabbi! A big honor! And that's why Levi promptly answers Jesus, "I'm in!"

But then something amazing happens. Levi is so touched by what Jesus did that

he invites Jesus and His disciples to go to his house for dinner. And not only that, Levi also invites other friends who are considered sinners in town. He is so happy that he calls the Local Jewish IRS chapter to come by for supper. These are not the Rotarians these are the Sinner-Tarians! He invites all of his tax collection colleagues, plus other people that society looks down upon. These are the outcasts. This is the original Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band!

Let me read to you a paraphrase of the same Bible passage I read earlier to emphasize how bad this band of partiers are. This is from a paraphrase called *The Message*.

Mark 2:15 Later Jesus and His disciples were at home having supper with a collection of disreputable guests. Unlikely as it seems, more than a few of them had become followers.

Mark 2:16 The religion scholars and Pharisees saw Him keeping this kind of company and lit into His disciples: "What kind of example is this, acting cozy with the riff-raff?"

Mark 2:17 Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit."

Yeah, you go, Lord. You tell them! The message is clear: Jesus wants to hang out with non-believers, the irreligious, the pagans, the not-so-nice people, the ones not seen as cool in society, the riff-raff, the ones who are seen as great sinners. In high school it might mean the lunch table where all of the uncool kids sit. And that is what we are all called to do. This week, you students, be like Jesus. Go sit with the uncool kids. It's the Jesus thing to do. Because at that moment, I don't think many are sitting with those uncool kids.

Victims of bullying in schools because people might think they are gay or uncoordinated or not good-looking or stupid or dress differently or think differently. That has to stop and someone has to stand with them.

If Jesus did Facebook and saw cyber-bullying, He would be commenting, "Cut it out! Stop it! Quit writing those words! You without sin cast the first 'stone' to Me."

The question was asked in verse 16 in the New Living Bible translation: "Why does Jesus eat with such scum?" or in *The Message*: "What kind of acting is this, acting cozy with the riff-raff?" It's the kind of action that Jesus and all of us followers at First Prez should be doing. Be like Levi.

Levi is touched by Jesus, and what does he do? He invites his friends to meet Jesus. To be exposed to Him. He starts with his circle of influence – other tax collectors, but the passage also says he invited other sinners, other people who are not normally accepted and are overlooked.

Friends, when many of us first became followers, we wanted to tell everyone about Jesus. For many of us maybe we were too zealous. But whether zealous or not, we wanted as many of our friends and loved ones to know about the joy we experience in Jesus.

But somehow, for many of us, that desire to tell others began to wane over the years of being a Christ-follower. We no longer felt the passion to do that. Or maybe we just started to like hanging out with only Christians and going only to Christian events.

Or maybe our love for Christ diminished. We stopped having our date nights with Jesus; stopped having devotionals with just Him; stopped going to church as often to sing to Him corporately (though singing in a congregation reminds us that it's not just about me. I sing with others and sometimes songs I don't like but THEY like.) Maybe we've stopped thinking of whom we can have dinner with or coffee with outside of the church campus so that our conversations might ultimately lead to that person getting a bit closer to Jesus.

I think of one person I know who, after his faith got kick-started, wanted all of his friends to know about Jesus. He would meet them in the shopping mall and invite them to church or for a conversation about Jesus. He thought about a vacation he could take to San Francisco, where he hoped to meet his friends to tell them about Jesus.

He then wanted his friends to go to Alpha, and so he invited them and was able to fill a whole Alpha table with just his friends. It was in a sense like Levi, inviting his friends to a dinner to meet Jesus. But maybe over the years for some of us, we've become more like Scribes and Pharisees. The sparkle of a relationship with Jesus is gone, and we're now more into the ritual of doing the churchy thing or the Christian thing.

The fire of a burning, personal intimacy with Christ, a flammable desire to have our friends know about Jesus through an invite to a party or an Alpha Course began to wane. Perhaps the bonfire of our passion for Jesus has become more like a pilot light.

Do you know of the comic-illusionist couple Penn and Teller? Penn Jillette, the tall guy between the two, is NOT a Christian. He is an AVOWED and VOCAL ATHEIST. But he told the story of how he was once evangelized by a polite and impressive man. Then Penn had this shocking thing to say, and I quote:

"I've always said, that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life or whatever and you think that well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward. [Then I ask] How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? "How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it,

and that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that." That's Penn Jillette, an atheist, asking, why don't Christians try to proselytize?

In the last book of the Bible, called Revelation (notice it is without an "S"), in Revelation chapter two and three, Jesus through the Apostle John speaks of 7 kinds of churches in the world, where each church represents something good or bad. One of the churches is in Ephesus, which Jesus describes as this:

Rev. 2:2 "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.

Rev. 2:3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

And that sounds all good. The Christians in Ephesus are doing great things! Maybe that sounds like us. We've not grown weary in bearing His name and in doing good. But then Jesus also says this about that church in Ephesus:

Rev. 2:4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Rev. 2:5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Ouch. Have we, as Christ-followers, forgotten or abandoned our first love of Jesus? When it was so passionate and exciting that we wanted to tell others about our wonderful Lord? Have we abandoned our first love?

Then there's the church in Laodicea, one of the seven described in Revelation, to whom Jesus is saying:

Rev. 3:15 "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot.

Rev. 3:16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

Rev. 3:17 For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Rev. 3:19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

Wow. Do we need to repent? Turn and change from a bad behavior? The first challenge is: "Have we grown lukewarm in our faith? Have we lost our first love of God?"

So how do we kick-start it? Maybe in community – through a Rooted gathering that starts this Wednesday, or a Life Training class, or a small group that meets regularly to talk story on faith. The buffet is out there offered to us.

Or are we saying, "I am rich. I have prospered. I need nothing. Thank you, Jesus. Oh, you want me to share my faith with others? Nope. Too busy. Thank you, Jesus. I am good now. You made me good. Thanks. It's all about using You to bless me, right?"

But Jesus is saying, "You may think you are rich, but without Me, you are actually poor. You may think you are rich and well dressed, but without me you are naked. You may think you can get along in life and be highly esteemed, but without Me you are blind and pitiable. And you may think that you, being an American and being in the top 5% bracket of the world's income, are doing fine but without Me, you are in poverty."

We need Jesus, and so do our family, friends, co-workers, classmates, and neighbors. Why are we not telling them about Jesus? For many of us perhaps we don't know how. We don't know what to say. But there is a fairly easy way to tell others about Jesus. Invite them to Alpha! It's a simple ten-week course geared for unchurched friends who might have lots of questions about God and faith but are afraid to ask because they don't want to

be judged or criticized. If you can only do 8 of the 10 sessions, still do it. ALPHA is geared to help people get the basics of the faith in a non-judgmental way. ALPHA starts this Wednesday. Dinner is free for ten weeks too. Really great Chinese and local food. Perfect for inviting.

We're offering ALPHA in a place where the non-religious might feel more comfortable, like how Levi's friends were at his luau. ALPHA will be in a karaoke restaurant in town. And they allow minors. This is perfect for our unchurched friends who don't want to come to a church. Or maybe we just want to go to see what it is like.

But we might say, "I don't want to go into an area where there might be riffs. And the place sells alcohol!" Maybe the friends of Levi might feel more comfortable in that setting. We will allow them to buy a drink, though not have more than one or two.

And the Scribe or Pharisee among us might say, "The rules are that you can't have such drinks at a church function." Now that you have read this passage, you tell me what Jesus would say in His desire to reach out to the irreligious so that some day they might be fully devoted followers of Christ. Might be worth a lunch or dinner discussion today or when you drive home. What would Jesus do?

In the Bible our Lord Himself was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. And I guess He put Himself in positions where He could be accused of that – especially after He changed water into wine for an entire wedding reception. Jesus might be the first person who said, and meant it, "The drinks are on Me."

But the short-term take-away today, at least one of them is this: Will you invite some friends to Alpha and maybe join them? You don't have to, but it might be nice. Or maybe go for yourself to see what it's like so that you can invite

friends later. A sacrifice of ten weeks, yes – but what would Jesus want you to do?

The Revelation passage about these seven kinds of churches ends with a well-known verse. Jesus says this after chastising six of the seven churches:

Rev. 3:20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

In the end Jesus wants to fellowship and eat with all of us. In all cultures to eat with someone is the basis of ohana. This is what family is all about: to break bread with someone, and share a cup.

Jesus is here to ask each of us, "Will you first trust Me? I can be your best friend. Will you eat with Me, hang out with Me, and allow Me to lead you in this life?"

Christianity is about friendship with God and friendship with others, and often that means a shared meal. In today's passage, we should be compelled to see that the Lord wants us to invite others to eat with us and with Him that they may know Him and trust Him and love Him.

Today is Communion. We do it every month. Why? Yes it's a sacrament. But more importantly, as you know from today's passage, this is how it all begins – with a meal with Jesus, breaking bread with Him. That's how it started with Levi and his friends. It's still true for us today.

Jesus is the God who wants to hang out and talk story and eat, and He will protect us so much so that He would give His life for us on a cross, so that though we might have been a tremendous sinner, knowing Him means all is forgiven. Come to Jesus; the slate is clean. He desires to be our friend. And so, as I walk to the communion table, we are reminded this sacrament began at the Last Supper, on a night when Jesus was betrayed. He was on a mission not to save those who think they are righteous but those who KNOW they are sinners.