

**“A Theology of Doing Lunch”**

**Introduction:** Just over a week ago (5/9), the NYT reported in its technology section on an intriguing trend. The title of the article was “Coffee Shops Skip Wi-Fi to Encourage Customers to Actually Talk.” It told of coffee shops, such as HotBlack, which opened last year in downtown Toronto, who are not providing their customers with Wi-Fi because they want to get people to talk to one another instead of burying their faces in their laptops. And it revealed that not only are seven of eight Café Grumpy coffee shops in New York City Wi-Fi free, but that Café Grumpy has intentionally narrowed its counters so that they’re less accommodating for laptop users.

Certainly, HotBlack and Café Grumpy are in the minority. And, lest you start to panic, Starbucks has no plans that I’m aware of to remove Wi-Fi from their hallowed spaces! But the concern over having our faces glued to a screen does point to the fact we have become a grab and go society, grabbing our coffee or our meal and eating and drinking it on the run toward something else, or eating it in front of a screen society, be it our laptop, our television, or our cellphone. How great it would be if conversation with another was actually making a comeback!

As followers of Jesus, what’s worth thinking about in all of this is our “theology of doing lunch,” or, what a mission strategy using conversation around a table and a meal might look like. Jesus, as I’ve been suggesting these past few weeks, spent a great deal of his time around a table with others. He even said of himself: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking . . .” (Lk. 7:34). This does not mean that Jesus spent most of his ministry in the fog of a hangover! Rather, it described his mission strategy. If his mission was to call sinners to repentance, as we heard in this morning’s text, then his strategy for doing that often centered around a meal. There, both the content of his message – amazing grace – and the nature of the community which he was forming – humble sinners in need of repentance – was lived out as he interacted with and invited people into life in his kingdom. Taking it one step further, if Jesus considered a table and a meal to be a significant component of his mission strategy, then I’m thinking so should we.

Let’s begin by considering what happened when Jesus visited Levi’s workplace, and then see what all the excitement was about when Jesus went to Levi’s house and sat down at his table.

**I. Jesus at Levi’s Workplace**

A. Levi was a tax collector who worked at a toll booth along a major trade route that ran by the Sea of Galilee. So, Levi collected taxes, on behalf of the Roman occupying power, imposed on the goods carried by the large caravans which passed by loaded with spices, cloth, ivory, and other precious commodities. Tax collectors were not liked as they were often dishonest and greedy, collecting as much as they could get away. As long as it got its share, the Roman government turned a blind eye. What was worse than their shady practices is that these fellows, who were Jews, were seen to be in collusion with the Romans, sworn enemies of the Jews and so, they assumed, of God as well. Thus, not only were tax collectors traitors to their own nation; they were traitors to God.

B. To Levi’s toll booth Jesus came. You can almost imagine him sitting down, pulling out his lunch, and watching Levi do his thing. But he didn’t scold Levi, nor give him a lecture on honesty. Rather, he simply invited Levi to follow him, to become one of his disciples. This was truly remarkable, for in

ancient times, it was always the prospective disciple that had to apply to be received by a rabbi and to pass certain tests in order to make the cut. Yet here was Jesus, inviting Levi to follow him with no application, nor any kind of qualifying exam. It was pure grace, and it's the way Jesus always operates. He doesn't begin with: 'get your act together and then you can follow me,' but instead, "follow me, and I'll show you and help you get your act together and live a godly life."

C. Levi left everything and followed Jesus. Why? The text is silent but my hunch is that Levi had finally had enough of his old life. My hunch is that the "everything" Levi left included all those places and activities and things Levi had been looking to in order to find meaning and purpose and security and which he had come to discover really led nowhere and provided nothing very meaningful or lasting. My hunch is that Levi was moved by the sense that this amazing man Jesus, who he had no doubt been hearing about, believed that Levi could actually become something good. Jesus saw all the brokenness and sin in Levi's life and friended him anyway. Wouldn't that have moved you?!

## II. Jesus at Levi's Table

A. Then, look what happens next! In response to Jesus friending Levi, Levi friends Jesus. Even more, he invites him into his entire friend group by throwing a party in order to introduce Jesus to all of his tax collecting friends. Let's notice three things about this party. First, user reviews can be very effective.

Illustration: One of the cultural trends that observers are highlighting is that what you say about your organization matters far less than what others who have experienced your product or place have to say. With a declining trust in authority and institutions among this coming generation, people are placing far more trust in user reviews than advertising copy. On sites like Amazon, for instance, user reviews are read with much greater interest and care than a manufacturer's promotional material (*Lasting Impact*, Carey Nieuwhof, 115-117).

In like manner, often the best advertisement there is for Jesus and his church comes from people whose lives have been greatly impacted by him and can't wait to share it with others in their friend group.

B. Second, notice that Levi doesn't invite his friends to a house of worship to meet Jesus, but to *his* house. Likely, a synagogue would not be the place his friends would initially be inclined to go. But they'd go to a house of someone they knew, and to a party, with tables filled with food!

C. Third, don't miss the fact that Jesus went! As far as we can tell, Jesus didn't hesitate for a minute. Jesus, it seems, knew something we might tend to forget: If the good news is going to reach those outside the church, we'll need to begin the process first by identifying and getting to know those who are not a part of the family of faith, and then by meeting them where they are, on their turf. This might not be an entirely comfortable experience as we go out with the crowd after work, or accept an invitation to a party in our neighbor's home. I'm sure it wasn't always comfortable for Jesus. Imagine the conversations he must have heard as these tax collectors and other "sinners" talked about what was going on in their life. Most likely when they began bragging about what they had done over the weekend up at the Galilee lake house Jesus' sin-o-meter began to buzz loudly! But I doubt he responded by saying: "Dude, if you die tonight do you know where you're going?" Probably he said, "How interesting! She sounds like quite a girl. Tell me more." The importance of listening, showing an

interest, and not jumping to judgment, cannot be overstated. Grace begins with friendship and then moves to changes in one's behavior, not the other way around.

D. Of course, the religious leaders of the day were scandalized because the other way around was the way they operated. They knew full well about Isaiah's prophecy anticipating God's great banquet for all people in his new creation but they didn't like the way Jesus was defining the word "all." They didn't mind the party; they just had a problem with the guest list! You see, who you ate with in the first century, your theology of doing lunch, was a major issue. To share a meal with someone in that day was a sign of trust, friendship, brotherhood, and even reconciliation. And unless and until you got your act together, the Pharisees wanted nothing to do with you at their table, and they for sure wouldn't go to yours.

And so they asked his disciples, "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?" They seemed to want Jesus to behave like a doctor who avoided sick people, which was really no doctor at all. But his way of acting and being missional turned the world upside down. He hung out with and welcomed the humble, those on the margins, those outside the faith community, those who knew their need. And he confronted and challenged the self-righteous and self-reliant. The only ones left out were those who reasoned they could get by just fine without him.

So what is our theology of doing lunch? How might we think about a table and a meal as part of our mission strategy?

1. It begins with understanding and soaking in the amazing grace that Jesus has poured out on us, sitting down at our table despite our unworthiness.
2. Then we need to ask, do we, like Levi, know people who don't know Jesus? If we do, who do we know well enough that we might invite them to the table in our home and get to know them on a deeper level, perhaps even sharing some of our experience of Jesus with them?
3. If we don't, are we willing to go to our neighbor's table, whatever that might be, and begin the process of simply starting a relationship, asking good questions and listening well to the answers?

You see, we can't point sinners to the Savior unless we're willing to spend time with them. Perhaps a table, and a meal, might provide a way to, humbly, go about doing this.