

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**July 22 & 23, 2017**  
**John Crosby**  
**Block Party: Levi's House | Matthew 9, Mark 2, Luke 5**

I love it when Debbie Manning does the prayers of the morning; she just connects us together. Debbie is currently one of our Congregational Care pastors and she is splitting her time between helping us and working at the Table. The Table is our 5:00 Sunday evening worship service that has gone down to Knox, and she is working in both places to sort of hold us together. While we want to bless Knox and make sure that it is a thrilling adventure, we also want to see what God is going to do here on Sunday nights. So we are doing a monthly experiment in different ways to gather as a worshipping community. One of those will be tonight at 5:00PM. If you would like to hear a different expression of worship that has the same DNA, why don't you come, and engage, and tell us what you think?

I think there are all kinds of parties. Everyone says birthday parties, Thanksgiving...but sometimes I think we need more dangerous parties. And by dangerous, I mean the parties you usually wouldn't go to. My brother and I share an affinity for great steak. We love steak. I love protein in all its forms. I love starch and sugar in all their forms....but I love Manny's. Classic restaurant. I tend to go to Manny's every time I'm invited to go to Manny's because it's pretty expensive. And my brother wanted to invite me one time. See Manny's had this room that was adjacent to the main dining room that was a cigar lounge where you could eat, but also puff on a cigar. They installed these high-powered fans to suck the cigar smoke up so that other people wouldn't have second-hand smoke. But, you have to remember when the anti-smoking legislation was implemented, even Manny's had to shut down their cigar lounge, and so this was billed as the last night to have a cigar at Manny's. And Joe said, "Come on. I've got a whole bunch of my friends coming. Come on." And I'm saying, "Joe, I'm just not sure those are my kind of people." And he said, "Come on." And it's sort of unusual, so I ended up going to Manny's and sure enough, I was right. I didn't know anybody. I knew one person in the middle of the room, and all the spots were taken. My brother is talking to 57 other people, so I sit over here at the end of a table and just eat my steak. A guy comes and sits down next to me and he is one of Joe's good friends. Joe knows him because Joe is a lawyer and he uses this person who is an elderly doctor—national reputation—uses him as an expert witness to testify about good work and bad work. So they have formed this bond over the years. So this guy comes up to me, introduces himself, and says, "Well, your brother outed you...says you're a preacher. I'll sit here anyway." Off to a good start. Great party. Then...I know you all speak Latin. In Latin the saying is, "In vino veritas" which means, "With wine comes truth." And that really just means your tongue gets loosened as you drink more, and there was a lot of vino going on at this dinner at Manny's and my brother's friend's tongue was loosened and the veritas started to come out. After the third or fourth glass he said, "You know, I'd like to believe but I don't. I'm

an atheist. I want to be an agnostic, but after all the stuff I've seen, I just think we are thirty pounds of dirty water in these sacks and we die." And I was like *oh, how fun for you.*

He was a great guy, wonderful conversationalist, and we built on the things we did have in common. We had a wonderful night—much more vino, much more veritas. The party finally broke up and several people had to be escorted to cabs and sent home. So, a couple of months later, Joe invited me to a charity golf thing, and he sticks me with this same doctor. We play together as partners and he is a wonderful guy—terrible golfer—and we get to the third tee and he says, "You know, hell, if more ministers came to Manny's I might even come to your place." And that was the end of our spiritual conversation that day too. But the next day he called the church office and left a message with my assistant. He said, "I played golf with John yesterday, and I would just like to know what is a non-profit that the church supports that helps poor people in the cities? We don't believe the same things, but we love the same things." And he sent me a very large check for Urban Homeworks, one of the places we support in the city. And as I looked at this check and I thought of this friend, I thought about Jesus and uncomfortable parties that He went to. One of those is the one that Kathleen read to the kids. It's found in Matthew and in Mark and in Luke, and in Mark's story it says this:

<sup>13</sup> Once again Jesus went out beside the lake...

Once again is because, remember last week Laura talked about Jesus going out to the lake and feeding the 5000.

<sup>13</sup> Once again Jesus went out beside the lake and a large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. <sup>14</sup> As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth.

Now, Levi son of Alphaeus means that he's a Jew. Sitting at the tax collector's booth means that he's a crook. So he's a Jewish crook. He is going along with the Romans, screwing the Jews, and so nobody likes him. The Romans don't trust him and the Jews hate him because he's a traitor.

And it says Jesus walked by and saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collectors booth, and Jesus didn't say *look at that jerk.*

"Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

The story goes on, and it says:

<sup>15</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house...

In other words, not just "follow me" but "I'll follow you to your house."

many tax collectors and sinners...

In the Bible, tax collectors and sinners is all one phrase. Any tax collector is a sinner.

...many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many [tax collectors and sinners] who followed him. <sup>16</sup> When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>17</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous [or the people who think they are righteous] but I have come for the sinners.” [Mark 2:13-17]

Dangerous party. Nobody got what they expected, but a party that our friend Levi, son of Alphaeus, never forgets. It's told the same way in the Gospel of Luke, but in the Gospel of Matthew it says Jesus was walking along and He saw Matthew, the tax collector, and He said *let's eat tonight at your house*.

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” [Matthew 9:9-11]

Levi is the same tax collector as Matthew the tax collector who becomes a follower of Jesus and writes one of the stories about Jesus—the Gospel of Matthew. He'll never forget that party.

Reggie Joiner does a great talk on this and he says that you ought to define what a party is for you, because it can look as small as two people having coffee or as big as 1000 people at a banquet. He said a party is any effort to celebrate, to enjoy, to serve others in ways that add value to life. So a real party isn't just *boy did we have a good time last night*, it's that it added richness, value, to the lives of the people who went.

Jesus goes to church, sure, but in the stories Jesus spends more time at parties. And I think that's because Jesus knew that sometimes it takes a party where you don't know everybody, where you're not doing all the inviting, where you're not in charge...Jesus knows that sometimes it takes a party to change the way that we see each other. To show people that God cares about parties. I was reminded at Manny's—God cares about all of these cigar smoking, whisky-guzzling people there for a great party. God loves them. You know, it said that the people who got angry with Jesus because He was at a party with the wrong people were the Pharisees. Another word in the time of Jesus for the Pharisees is that they were called “the serious ones.” The Pharisees are the serious ones. Now some of that is because they are serious about loving God, wanting to follow God, wanting to obey God—that's great—but they were never the life of the party. They were the serious ones. They were sort of anti-party, and Jesus knew that sometimes it takes a party to show that God cares about the people at the party. I think Jesus also loved parties because He knew that sometimes it takes a party to

confirm that you can have a fresh start. At parties you can celebrate a new beginning. Maybe the most famous party in the Bible story is the party that the dad throws when the prodigal son comes home. It said he wrapped his arms around him saying, “Spread the feast!” He started a huge party because the son was dead and now he’s found. Forgiveness. A new beginning. And you know what is so fascinating about that? The Pharisees were at that party too...called the older brother. The older brother says *I’m not coming to the party if he’s there, because he’s one of the bad guys. Do you know what he does on Thursday nights?* Jesus knows that sometimes it takes a party to make sure that everybody knows that there is forgiveness, that we can start again. I think Jesus wants you to go to more parties, because He knows that sometimes it takes a party to show people that *those people matter more than your opinions. People matter more than your opinions.* You and I are living in an age where we have very divided opinions about everything...whether that’s illegal immigration or gay marriage, whether that’s about race or tax cuts. And it becomes so important to know what this person’s opinion is before we’ll have a relationship with them—or, it breaks our relationship. And Jesus says *Throw a party! People are more important than opinions.*

So Jesus eats with the Pharisees and Jesus eats with the broken people, with the sinners, because He’s not in the judgment business, He’s in the loving people business. Sometimes it takes a party to remind us that everybody is invited to Jesus’ party. There will even be Baptists at Jesus’ party. Jesus is putting together the invitation list for the party and everybody’s name is on it. Everybody who is black is on it, everybody who is Hispanic is on it, everybody who is white is on the list, everybody who is Asian gets an invitation, everybody who is Middle Eastern gets two invitations, everybody who is young is invited, and everybody who is old. Everybody who is a Viking fan gets an invitation, and everybody who is a Green Bay...well, you gotta stop somewhere. But everybody who is a Green Bay Packer fan gets an invitation too. The iPhone people and the Android people are both invited. The gay people and the straight people and the confused people...they are all on the list. Every one of you that likes Beyoncé will hear that music at the party and every one of you who loves Yo-Yo Ma will hear that too. All of you who love James Taylor...wait, who doesn’t love James Taylor? That’s everybody! Jesus invites everybody who is a Democrat. Jesus wants to make sure that everybody who is a Republican is not only invited, but drawn in. And He’s just getting warmed up. He doesn’t want you to look down the list and cross anybody out, and that is why the Biblical parties—the stories that are told about Jesus and parties—are so tense. Because Jesus wants everybody at the party, and the religious people want the nice people at the party, the people who will agree with them at the party. And Jesus says if the word gospel really means good news, that means the gospel does not discriminate—it integrates, it brings us together.

We have been taught that being a disciple is about getting the right answers, that discipleship means information. But following Jesus is almost always much more about relationships than information. About our relationship with God, and our relationship with other people—even the not nice people, even the people who are on the other side. And you and I often miss the link between loving other people and spiritual

development. The biggest link between spiritual development and other people is whether they are loved or not.

I talked about Reggie Joiner...our staff is learning to pray together, and so on Tuesday mornings we gather together for prayer, and a couple of weeks ago a member of our Kids Team was leading the prayer time and she talked about this passage and read a story by Reggie Joiner. He said this: "Let me tell you about Tom. He was our next-door neighbor when my family moved to Mobile, Alabama. The first day the moving truck pulled in, Tom was in the driveway waiting. Obviously he had done a background check on me, because as soon as I stepped out of the car, Tom said, 'So, I hear you are the new pastor in town. Can I just tell all the neighbors to call you Rev?' It was awkward and before I could say *no, just call me Reggie*, he says, 'I know what we will call you. You have the same hairline as the Pope. From now on, you're our neighborhood Pope.' It was not the way I had hoped to start." Joiner said, "Tom and I were as different as two people could be. He was a liberal Catholic. I was a conservative Evangelical. He was a very vocal extrovert. I was a reserved introvert. He had three boys in college. I had four kids under the age of seven. He golfed a lot. I was a Christian. He hosted a lot of parties. I'm sort of not a party guy, but there was no way to hide from Tom. He seemed to be waiting outside the house every day to pull me in, to get to know me better, curious about everything I did, and even though I was good natured, he interrogated me relentlessly about my church. He said, 'What do you guys have against women? I don't understand this, what do you guys have against gay people? What do you guys have against Disney—who doesn't love Disney? What do you guys have against people who love each other living together?' It wasn't that he was critical or sarcastic, he liked to poke fun, but I got the impression he was always a little perplexed about the faith thing. One day as I was backing out of the driveway, Tom stopped me and asked a strange question. He said, 'Do you ever pray at parties?' When I looked confused, he said, 'Well, I'm having a graduation party for my oldest son, and I thought that maybe it would be a good idea if somebody would pray for him. Could you put that on your calendar?' What could I say? I said sure, and then a couple of weeks went by and I forgot about it. All of a sudden a man pulls up in a truck, pulls a dolly out of the truck, and starts stacking crates on it. I look closer and realize the driver is delivering kegs and kegs and kegs of beer to Tom's front door. The more boxes coming off the truck, the more uncomfortable I got. Now, I know this was not a big deal, but I grew up in a denomination that was very strict about not drinking. My parents never drank, even to this day. I don't drink. I have family members and friends who drink, and they love Jesus better than I do, but when I was a young pastor my circle of friends was non-drinkers. I'd never been to one of Tom's parties, but I knew what was coming and I didn't want to go. My wife said *you've got to go*. So I figured, *I'll go and I can slip out right after I pray*. And that night I went to my first party at Tom's house. We gathered the family and the friends around this circle of the kegs with drinks in our hands, and we prayed for his son. When we finished praying, I looked up at Tom and he was crying. He bear-hugged me and he thanked me, and then he said, 'I hope you will hang out a while at the party. I know God brought you here to be my neighbor.' So I stayed."

There is a party happening and there are people hungry to be loved. There is a party happening, and most of their idea at the party is not coming to church. It's about the God of parties going out through you. There's a party going on and it's going to be one heaven of a party because God is inviting everybody. The invitation went out again this morning about six minutes ago, and it has your name on it. And like a lot of invitations, it says your name plus one. That means don't come to the party alone.

Who needs to go to a party where there is joy, and life, and value added, where people feel like they are loved rather than examined?

We should bring Jesus to more parties, because like Kathleen said, "It's time for the doctor to make house calls." Dr. Jesus wants to make house calls in a way that makes people's hearts glad. Let's go to the party.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You didn't come and say *John, you have to try harder. Carrie, you screwed up again. Tom, you know what you did.* You said, "Come to Me. Follow Me." Let's have a party at Your house tonight. And the great banquet feast of heaven is slowly filling up with people who are not lectured, they are loved. Teach us to love like that. Send us to more parties. In Your name. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*