

I just love a good story. Even as a youngster, I always looked forward to listening to those “*make believe*” stories that begin with the phrase, “*Once upon a time.*”

And this is one of my favorites. **Once upon a time,** there were two very special men and there was this perfect neighborhood where its residents kept the streets clean, the lawns manicured, and the shrubbery neatly trimmed. Every household had two parents, two kids, and two pets, and they always turned out their lights by the end of the “WGEM News at Ten.” And, yes, they were perfectly content with their quiet lives until a single man named Levi bought the over-priced house on the corner of Chestnut and Pine.

That’s because Levi drove a bright red, loud Ferrari, and his lawn was usually overgrown, littered, and his mailbox was always overflowing. Stacked high on his front porch were UPS and FedEx deliveries and an overflowing garbage can. His lights were always on, and his window shades were never closed, not even after dark.

And to make matters even worse, once Levi closed the deal on the high-priced real estate, he had an Olympic-sized pool installed in the backyard, which he lit nearly every night with lights he must have stolen from an MLB stadium. Shortly afterwards, he built a huge deck, and then he engineered an outdoor sound system that would rumble teeth roots. When the neighborhood was winding down, Levi was just beginning to wind up.

And talk about parties! Parked on the front lawn was everything from BMW’s to Harley’s to jacked-up pickups. There were ear piercings and shaved heads on the guys, and tattoos and nose rings on the girls. They talked too loud and imbibed way too much.

When the fine neighbors drove to church on Sunday mornings, they looked at the tire tracks on the cluttered front lawn of their new neighbor and said to their kids, “*That man really needs some religion.*”

And guess what happened? A religious teacher strolled right into the neighborhood, going house to house, asking if anyone had time to talk. But no one did. No one, that is, except for the guy with the loud car and the loud friends on the corner of Chestnut and Pine.

The minister knocked on the man's door, and the man invited him in for supper, eventually explaining his unsavory past and the parson telling the man about forgiveness and the future. But the guy asked, *"Even for someone like me?"* To which the smiling religious teacher answered, *"Yes, especially for someone like you."*

Quite a story, isn't it? Would it be more believable if I said it was Jesus speaking to Levi, a.k.a. Matthew, the apostle and gospel writer? But first, let me jog your memory a bit. Before Levi, a Jew, helped write the Bible, he helped himself to the pockets of his fellow countrymen as a tax agent in King Herod's Department of Revenue.

In the ancient world people were saddled with a number of taxes, and there were two primary types of tax collectors. One collected property, income, and poll taxes, otherwise generally set taxes. The other collected taxes on imports and exports, trade goods, and anything that was transported by road.

Levi was the latter, and he and his tax collector friends were expected to over-collect and retain a commission to serve as their pay. They were permitted by Caesar to tax almost anybody for anything that moved.

We could be walking down a road which we've used for 10 years, and all of a sudden, a tax collector sets up his booth and starts charging us for using the road. The tax was even worse when you had a cart because you had to pay extra for the cart! And if the cart was being pulled by animals, that was extra also.

Just try to imagine what it was like if you were to mix the Mafia with the IRS. Suppose the IRS just shows up one day with their shady hit men, and in that burly *God-Father* type voice, say *"Pay me \$10k!"*

And you reply, “*But I already paid my taxes.*” They tell you it doesn’t matter because there was a tax hike and you get to pay it. “*But I didn’t read about it in the Quincy Herald-Whig,*” you object. “*We’re telling you about it right now!*” they shout. Well, this is very close to the way tax gathering was done in the time of Christ.

And the Roman government had a difficult time collecting taxes from Jewish people because many of them had no qualms about killing a Gentile who wanted to take their money to support the pagan Roman government. So the government’s answer was to hire Jewish people.

And Levi was one of those people - despised, hated and rejected in Israel. It’s said that when tax collectors walked down the street, people would spit at them, throw rocks, and even curse them.

At any rate, tax collectors like Levi were allowed to keep all they could exploit, and Levi took a lot. You might say that he was *alligator sandals* and *tailored robe* rich.

He’d swapped his dignity for a fat wallet. So you can bet that he was shunned by most everybody from the neighborhood.

Everyone, that is, except for Jesus, who is out in the town and sees Levi sitting at a tax booth. Jesus doesn’t tell Levi to stop stealing, or get his act together, or behave differently. Jesus simply tells him to “*follow me.*” Funny, isn’t it? When others saw a despised tax collector, Jesus saw a gift of God.

Surprisingly, the sinful tax collector’s response to Jesus was nothing short of dramatic. Verse 28 says, “*He left everything.*” I found that interesting since the fishermen could always go back to their fishing, but a tax collector couldn’t go back to his job because it was so competitive. It would’ve been bid out to the highest bidder.

Nonetheless, Levi didn’t even bargain with Jesus. He just closed the books, left his tax booth, took his pen with him and started writing down what Jesus said and what he did. And we have it today, the Gospel according to Matthew.

So what do you do when your life is transformed for the better? Like when you get married? Or when you graduate from high school or college?

Odds are, you throw a party, right? When great things happen to us, our natural desire is to share that joy with others, right? And salvation is certainly something worth celebrating. It's celebrating the new life one has in Jesus. But for Levi, it's also so he could introduce his friends to Jesus. *"I want my publican friends to meet Jesus, who has changed my life!"* This must have been at least #2 on his list.

So Levi throws a party, *"a great banquet"* we're told. And if anyone could throw a party, it was a tax collector.

Now, I have to wonder what kind of thoughts might raced through Levi's head leading up to that party. So let's return to our "Once-upon-a-time" story and give it a try.

First and foremost, who in the world could ever forget their old friends. Levi must have known that he was going to miss the gang. After all, a friend is a friend you know.

So one day Levi meets up with Jesus at a little place on the edge of town, maybe someplace like the 'Warsaw Brewery,' and shares his problem. "Jesus, *I've got my own circle, ya know?*

I've got nothing against Peter, Andrew, James, or John, but aren't they the Sunday morning type? I'm well, you know, Saturday night.

"I'm really going to miss Billy Bob, Bubba Joe, and Curly Bill. I know they're kind of 'seedy characters,' but Billy Bob donates blood whenever he thinks about it. Bubba Joe volunteers at the local food pantry every once in a while. And Curly Bill? Why he's paid my bail more than once!"

Jesus has a grin on his face that reaches from ear-to-ear. *"Levi, let me tell you something. To be my friend doesn't mean you can't be their friend. It's just the opposite. I'd like to meet them."*

"Are you serious? You do know they aren't welcome in synagogues," says Levi.

“Is the high priest a Jew?” Jesus asks. “Believe it or not, I’m not welcome either. So how about throwing a party and we’ll get both groups together.”

Now, having left it all, one would think that Levi would’ve held a wake rather than a reception. Nonetheless, he hurries to make a guest list, calls his caterer, and instructs his personal aid to send out the invitations.

Now I’m just guessing, but I’d bet that this celebration wasn’t a simple backyard cookout but a **huge** bash with a **very** loud crowd. No doubt, Levi gathered everyone from his world. There must have been sports car enthusiasts, bikers, and yes, now Bible toters.

But remember, in Galilee at the time, a meal like this was a public event. Even people who were not invited to dinner would sometimes watch from the outside, and this is very likely why the Pharisees were present. So just try to paint a picture in your mind of a happy hour crowd and a Sunday School class at the same party. Not easy, is it?

But Jesus, well, Jesus is beaming from ear to ear. After all, what could be better than seeing sinners and saints in the same room? But when the religious leaders got wind of the party, they spoiled it. They were about as cheerful as a marine drill sergeant, and they were packing massive black books under their armpits, books containing hundreds of more ‘*don’ts*’ than the ten given to Moses.

You see, since a dinner was a very intimate experience and sharing a meal with someone was seen as an act of acceptance, the Pharisees are concerned that Jesus is accepting of the sinful party-goers. They don’t have an issue with the fact that Jesus may call these sinners to repent, but that this didn’t happen before he chose to dine with them. Verse 30 explains: ***“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”***

Ooops! Levi and his friends knew they didn’t fit in. All their lives they’d been told, *“You aren’t good enough for God.”*

*“But not so fast,” Jesus said. Verses 31-32 tell us that **“Jesus answered them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’**”*

I love the sarcasm Jesus uses to point out that the right candidate for his mercy is the one who knows they are sick and in need of medicine. The PhD’s of Jewish law thought they were spiritually healthy and righteous and could point out the sins of others. And since they didn’t think they were sick, they saw no need for Jesus. Levi and his gang, however, made room for Jesus and Jesus made room for them.

Quite a story, isn’t it? Levi goes from double dealer to disciple. He throws a party that makes the religious right uptight. And we see a Savior whose ministry partners can include anyone from any background, including the morally corrupt, the socially unacceptable, and those you would never think to invite into your home. Quite a story indeed.

And what a lesson this brief passage of Scripture is for us. Above all else, we see God’s grace to those the world writes off. When we get to heaven, we’re going to be blown away by who we see there. And people are going to be blown away to see us there! *“What are you doing here?”* And we’re just going to say, *“The grace of God! I’m saved by God’s grace.”* Amazing, isn’t it?

God doesn’t wait for us to clean up our act or to get our life together. Hey, when kids play in the mud, their parents don’t say, *“I don’t love you anymore.”*

No, they say, *“Here, let me clean you up.”* Jesus, too, says, *“I’ll clean you up. Approach and I will heal you of your sins.”*

My Aunt Rose made the best doggone dill pickles. During my summer visits I would watch her take a **whole bunch** of cucumbers and immerse them into a hot solution with salt, vinegar, dill and other spices. In time, they turned into something altogether new: my favorite pickles.

And though I never fully understood how she changed her cucumbers into pickles, there is one thing I can tell you: I've never seen someone take a pickle and turn it back into a cucumber. The change is permanent and irreversible.

When we, like Levi, answer Jesus' call to "*follow me,*" to accept Him as our Lord and Savior, we become a new being. The old is gone and the new has come. This change is also permanent and irreversible.

Now this doesn't mean we behave perfectly going forward, but because we're now in an intimate faith-trust relationship, the Lord guides us and corrects us through His Word and the Holy Spirit. We are not sinless but He gives us the power to resist sin.

Remember also that Levi opened his home and introduced his friends to Jesus. We, too, can choose to open our life to those in our circle of influence so that they can meet Jesus. Or do we find ourselves avoiding those who need Christ? Do we ignore them, leave the room when they enter, or share a meal with them?

I wonder if the best answer might be found in Paul's letter to the Roman church: "***Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.***" I just love a quote by Mother Teresa: "*There's more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.*"

Which leads me to a final thought and question. Have we ever considered hosting an "*Invite a Friend to worship and dinner Sunday*"? Somehow I think God would really, really like that. AMEN.