

“Let’s Get This Party Started!”

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Introduction

I think there’s something special that happens when we let our guards down and play, and enjoy life. I recently re-read a story in one of my favorite books—*Dangerous Wonder*, by Youth Ministry Expert Mike Yaconelli. In his chapter called, “Daring Playfulness,” he tells the story of a set of parents who were at their wits end in trying to communicate with their withdrawn teenage son. Their son, Ron, seemed to suddenly turn from a “normal” straight-A student into—Yaconelli’s words—a black-clad “punk-rocker”. There were constant battles at home, and Ron’s parents were willing to try anything to get through to their son.

After about 6 months of increasing tension in the home, Ron’s parents sought out some counseling to try to help them sort through emotions and gain some tools for

learning how to communicate well with their son. After many more months of hard work, their counselor suggested trying something a bit out the ordinary.

He suggested that when they got home that night, they should go immediately to Ron’s room, bang on the door and tell him to join them in the living room, ‘cause they wanted to talk to him. And when he finally saunters into the room, they should look him square in the eye, and say: “Ron, your mother and I are counting to one hundred. No go hide.”

This is how Mike Yaconelli describes the situation:

When you love your son like these parents did, desperation combined with love will motivate you to try anything—even play. And one night that is what they did. Can you imagine the look on Ron’s face? Can you imagine what Ron said to his friends the next day? “You guys are never going to guess what happened last night. I played hide-and-seek with my parents until three in the morning. I still can’t find them.” Ron didn’t become a Republican or start listening to country and western

music, but when his parents played hide-and-seek with him, they did break through the longstanding tension and began the long process of healing.” (pg. 73)

Life is hard enough as it is. Stress feels like it's at an all-time high for many, and loneliness is the #1 problem for many folks, especially here in our own Northwest region. But I wonder what it would look like if we added a bit more play into our lives... This doesn't have to mean that we don't work hard at the stuff of life and faith, but what if we were also seen as people authentically full of joy....because THAT, I believe, is truly contagious!

This is a little bit what the story of Levi shows us—his newfound joy was contagious, and it caused the Pharisees to question it....Because Levi was filled with an Evangelistic Playfulness.

Inclusion • Point 1

I know you all have been going through the Gospel of Luke, and in Luke there are a number of these “Call

Stories”, where different disciples are invited by Jesus to join Him on His new adventure of faith. In the call of Levi here, we see again this principle that Jesus is intentional about Including Everyone—even those who were not popular or even liked by anyone else. [Levi was a Tax Collector—some of the most hated people in all of the Ancient Near East. These folks were known for the fact that they had free reign to steal from their own people, so they could make an extra buck...or hundred. They were not popular people.

But Jesus wanted to be around them. Jesus sought Levi out and asked him to be a part of what Jesus was doing.

This is in direct contrast to what we see in the second half of this passage with the Pharisees—the Pharisees were known for their exclusivity; they intentionally separated themselves from those who were not holy; the riff-raff of

society, if you will... And they prided themselves on their devout holiness and their pious company.

But Jesus didn't seem to be all that impressed with their choices. Jesus had seemed to build up a reputation for spending time with the exact people the Pharisees tried to avoid. Jesus sought out those who needed the Good News most; those who knew they couldn't fix themselves alone. It's why Jesus makes the declarative statement in: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Levi's Party—Who's Invited • Point 2

As soon as Levi is invited to follow Jesus, the first thing he does is throw a party for Jesus, where he invites all of his friends...and from the reaction of the Pharisees to this party, it's clear that not many of Levi's friends have become Followers of Christ yet. Levi had made a dramatic change in his life, and instead of abandoning all

of his former friends and colleagues—'cause they wouldn't be "uplifting" to him anymore... Instead, he invites them all to a party!

It's as if Levi understood that he had met someone who had literally changed his life, and he could not wait for the rest of his friends to meet this same life-changing man. His life was so dramatically and instantly different, that he wanted all the other sick people he knew to encounter this same healing and saving man, so that their lives too could become transformed. Instead of cutting off all of his non-Christian friends, Levi invites them over for a party! And in fact, Everyone is invited!

We know from the text that this party caused quite the scandal for Jesus and his friends—Jesus was developing a reputation for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors... and it wasn't making him all that popular with the Pharisees and the other religious folks of the day.

They made the assumption that since Jesus was sharing a table with these “sinners”, that he also condoned their bad behavior. And so they asked a passive aggressive question to Jesus’ disciples about it.

But Jesus sees his actions through a different light. Jesus understands that separating yourself completely from others, cuts them off from the life-giving relationships they so desperately need! Jesus understood that his interactions with these people was NOT the same as his endorsement of their behavior—but it WAS a way to build a deep relationship with them, in order to begin to transform their hearts.

It’s why Jesus explains to the Pharisees in verse 32 that he has come not just be with the sinners, but that his ultimate purpose is to call them to repentance. It’s a glimpse into the whole story.

Sidebar—New Wineskins • Point 3

At the end of our story today, there’s this little sidebar; a little detour Jesus takes. He uses some commonly recognized parables or examples to get his point across about being willing to try something new. He mentions that it would not be common to tear a new garment to create a patch for an old and worn-out garment—because that would ultimately damage both pieces. □ And he uses the example of putting new—and still fermenting—wine into old, brittle wineskins; as the new wine fermented, the old wineskins would break, thus destroying both the skin and the wine.

These examples are somewhat familiar to us, even if we don’t fully understand them. But the subtle point Jesus was making with these examples was that people often want to stick with the old—
with what’s familiar,
what’s comfortable,
what’s known....

and are unwilling to try something new. Like Jesus says in verse 39, too many people prefer the familiar, saying “The old is better.”

Jesus challenges this idea of sticking our heads in the ground, and avoiding anything new. In his context—

- the Good News of the Gospel was the “new thing;”
- His intentionally reaching out to people on the outside was the “new thing”....

and too many religious people were uncomfortable with this, and wanted to stick to their known traditions and rituals; and their safe community.

Even as just a side note—I think these examples have something to teach us today.

- Do we tend to look at new things with the eyes of the Pharisees—not wanting to try it or see it as something valuable and worthwhile?

- Have we allowed ourselves to become so comfortable with what’s familiar to us that we are unable to move and grow with the changing needs of those who still need Jesus in their lives?

For me, I have been wrestling with these questions for myself recently. Starting this year, along with another female colleague, we will be starting the very first ECO Church Plant up here in Western Washington. And these types of difficult, but engaging, questions are framing how we will organize ourselves and attempt to reach out to those in our neighborhoods. We are feeling the call to be creative and to try something new, for the sake of reaching people who do not yet know Jesus.

This new way of doing church is actually very much in-line with what Levi chooses to do with his friends. He wanted to connect with them through real relationships.

Let's be Known as Partiers!! • Point 4

I think one thing that's important to remember from this passage is HOW these new Christians were perceived in their community at the time. At some level, they were known as people who liked to party.

Levi gets called to be a disciple of Jesus, and he immediately throws a Party for Jesus, and invites everyone he knows! In fact, it's such a big party, that those who weren't invited—like, the Pharisees—heard about it,
were intrigued,
and showed up anyway!

Later, the Pharisees note that Jesus and his disciples are known in the community—not for their fasting habits, like John's disciples, or like the Pharisees....but they were known as people who eat and drink. They were known as partiers!

I think there's something to this. Jeff Vanderstelt—the former pastor of the SOMA Tacoma Church down south in Tacoma, talks a lot about how Christians should be known as people who like to party! Unfortunately, too many times—Christians have the reputation as being the “Party-Poopers”; like, “Aw man, the Christians are here now...the party's over....”

Last year, during the Christmas season, our neighbors decided to throw a Christmas party for all the neighbors on our block. And I remember meeting many of the folks who live on our street—and of course, everyone was asking the normal questions of what each person does for a living. When my husband, Mike, finally showed up after work, and people found out that he's a therapist—I remember making a joke to the folks sitting next to me, that:
“Yes, I'm a pastor and my husband is a therapist—no one likes to invite us to their parties!”

But what if the opposite was really True?

What if the Christians were known as the ones who brought the party with them? What if, instead of being disappointed that the boring, stuffy Christians finally showed up; what if instead they said something like, “Awesome; the Christians are here! Now we can get this party started!”

Jeff Vanderstelt also talks about how the Christians should be known as bringing the BEST wine. When Jesus was a guest at the Wedding in Cana in John 2—and the wine ran out, he performed the miracle of turning water into wine....but it was noted that it was actually really good wine that he made. Jesus shows up to the party, and brings the best wine to the event—and that's when the party gets started!

We should follow His example...although I realize that maybe it's not real wine we bring to the party;

...but we still bring the best—

Best food, best games, best snacks, best drinks, gifts....

Too many times, I think, Christians can be labeled as boring or stuffy or cheap... We invite folks to come to church with us; and maybe all some people see are spectators who end up doing a lot of frowning and judging, and who fill their time with “busy work.”

But, what kind of difference would it make if we were known as lively, fun, generous partiers! I think this is important—not just so we can become the life of the party and uber-popular; but because this kind of life and joy is contagious! It's evangelistic. People desire to be around life-filled people.

Jesus hung-out at parties—not because he was a lush or a glutton (although was accused of this); but because He knew that's where hurting people hung-out. He knew

that He had to be intentional and take the initiative to reach out and build relationships with the people who needed Him most.

Mike Yaconelli puts it this way:

"Instead of Christians wearing sackcloths and ashes at the condition of our world, maybe we should strike up a game of capture the flag in our neighborhood. Our neighbors may need Jesus, but first they need a rousing evening of charades. Certainly our children need discipline, but what they may need more is a family Ping-Pong championship. What if our strategy to win the world was to 'play' people into the kingdom of God? What if we invited people over to our home and, instead of telling them about our joy, lived it by playing with them? What if we could hear laughter in a church as well as 'amens'?" (pg. 72)

There are so many ways to be creative about how to do this. One thing I have tried to do in my own neighborhood is that I recently started a Neighborhood Book Club. I just put out the idea on our Facebook page for the neighborhood, and a handful of people

responded. But at our last meeting a couple of weeks ago, we had 4 brand-new people who had been invited by friends, with a total of somewhere between 9-12 people being a part of it—if everyone shows up! Building relationships with others and showing them Jesus, doesn't have to be boring work.

Another way I'm trying to engage with people I know is to SAY YES, whenever I'm asked to do something.

- Need me to take your garbage cans in? Yes.
- Want to meet us for a late dinner? You bet.
- The Fly Fishing Club needs a new Secretary for the Board? Count me in!

Saying YES is a great way to meet and help others, bring them a bit of Good News, and to begin to build transformative relationships with them.

So, friends, as this new year has begun—this is the challenge I think we have before us...
to be creative,

to be imaginative;

to do something out of the ordinary.

- Throw a party.
- Bring the best appetizers.
- Start a neighborhood-wide game of hide-and-seek.
- Laugh out loud...until you cry.

And let people see on your face the JOY of the Lord.

And I promise you, this is exactly the kind of life that people are searching for! Amen.