

# HARVEST TIME

HARVESTING FOR JUSTICE - THAT ALL MAY HAVE ENOUGH



July 2006

**HARVEST TIME is rooted in the Biblical vision of economic justice which calls us to harvest God's abundant creation in such a way that everyone has enough.**

**Through a variety of avenues, Harvest Time supports Christians of unusual wealth as they move into deeper freedom so that their personal resources become instruments of God's love and justice.**

**Harvest Time is partnered with over 25 grassroots ministries in political and economic "war zones" in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Washington, DC. Wealthy Christians in the Harvest Time network are invited to invest their lives and resources in these partnerships. Harvest Time's primary mission, however, is to encourage wealthy Christians to freely and joyfully respond with their lives and money according to the leading of God's Spirit—within or beyond Harvest Time's own efforts to stand in economic solidarity with the poorest of the poor.**

## *Levi's Table: Welcoming Our Inner Money Sinner* by Rosemary Feerick

### The Setting

**I** am standing in a bar.

A group from a local parish has invited me to talk about money for their "theology on tap" series. Preaching in a bar is a dream come true for me. I have long fantasized about starting a church that meets in a tavern. There is something about the tavern setting that seems to make it easier for some of us to bring forth our not so polished parts – the parts in need of redemption – which is why I think there should be a church that meets in a bar. As I stand here, I am in a state of delight.

Before setting up, I look around. The room is messy. The scattered chairs and tables don't match. Just off center is a pool table. On one wall, draped over the corner of a mirror is an abandoned dusty black shirt with a dollar sign taped to one sleeve. The setting is perfect. I turn on "The Man in Black," a song by my favorite barroom minister, Johnny Cash, and begin my preparations.

At 7:20, people begin to arrive. They trickle in at first. A couple of elderly women are the first to walk through the door. Then comes a

small group of twenty somethings. Then some middle aged men. Then some older women. Finally a couple of nicely dressed professionals take their seats. Some have glasses of wine or beer in hand. Others drink water or soda. Several help themselves to the chocolate kisses I have placed on the pool table "altar." Finally, a young woman stands up and introduces me.

I begin.

### The Scripture

**"T**onight we're going to do a ritual called, 'Levi's Table.' It's based on the story of the Call of Levi. I'd like to begin by reading the text."

*As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus heard this and said to them, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do.*

*Nurturing a new breed of rich rulers not turning away sadly (Mark 10:22), but turning to Jesus with rejoicing and hilarious generosity.*

*I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2: 13-17 (see also Matthew 9:9-13 and Luke 5:27-32)*

## The Ritual

“Please take a moment to get in touch with your inner money sinner.”

The group looks at me suspiciously.

“Look, it says right there in the story that Jesus hung out with sinners. And I know that there is not one of us here who gets money right all the time. Now we can either pretend that’s not true or we can get real with Jesus.”

Some people are smiling – picking up on my sense of humor. Others look confused.

“Let me show you what I mean.”

I put on a vibrant orange and red tie dye shirt.

“Hello, my name is Fire E. Rose. I have this problem with money. It burns right through my hands. As soon as I get a little extra, it’s gone. Just like that. Sometimes all it leaves is a trail of smoke. Don’t get me wrong. It goes to good places. I give it away. I do things for my kids. I buy gifts for people. It’s good stuff. But the simple truth is I can’t hold onto money. You know what I mean?” A few people nod.

I take off the tie-dye and put on thick glasses. I pick up a calculator and my budget book. In a low voice, I introduce another part of myself:

“Hello, my name is EXCEL. I like to do things right - especially

*“...it says right there in the story that Jesus hung out with sinners. And I know that there is not one of us here who gets money right all the time. Now we can either pretend that’s not true or we can get real with Jesus.”*

money. I do a really good job of keeping track of money. I have this budget book where I write things down by hand. I’ve got everything tracked in nice, neat categories, as you can see.” I open the budget book and hold it up for them to see.

“One of my favorite things to do is to add up all the numbers. Sometimes I stay up really late putting the numbers into their proper categories. Then I add them up. And then I add them up again. And then again. It’s kind of like a game. Sometimes I get so excited adding up the numbers that I lose track of time and before I know it it’s the middle of the night.

“At home, I’ve got this computer program that tracks the long range stuff. The program takes into account everything that could possibly go wrong in my life. As you can see on this graph here, I’ve got enough to last me until I die which, according to my computer’s calculations, will happen when I am 85.”

I take off the glasses and check to see if the audience is getting the idea. They are.

“Now it’s your turn. Please let

your money sinner – the part of you that is not free when it comes to money – introduce him or herself. Let him or her have a voice. Don’t worry too much about getting it right. In fact, you should feel very free to do this wrong. Just let your money sinner come to the table however he or she wants to.”

I put on some music and wait for the “money sinners” to arrive. A few minutes later, I check to see who has come to “Levi’s Table.” A tall Southern gentleman stands up.

“Hello. My name is Phillde Luker. I’ve just come from my financial advisor who told me that I’m worth 12.6 million. I’ve decided that it’s time to come out of the closet about that. I’ve spent most of my life pretending that I don’t have much money. But I’m not going to do that anymore. Starting tonight, I want everyone to know the truth. I am worth 12.6 million.

“I’ve also decided that it’s time to talk to Jesus about money. I notice that Jesus had a lot of negative things to say about rich people. I know he would probably see me as a rich man. But I think I need to talk to him about that. Do you remember what Donald Rumsfeld said when he asked for \$200 billion for the war? He said that compared to all the wealth in America, \$200 billion isn’t that much. When you think of it that way, 12.6 million really isn’t that much money.”

“Welcome, Phillde!” I say smiling.

On the other side of the room, a woman begins to speak.

“Hello. My name is Hestia Hoarder. I am the goddess of my family’s hearth. I like taking care

of my home – fixing it up, making it nice for my family. I have these friends who talk about giving money away, but that talk annoys me. My friends already raised their families. They already had their homes. So what I want to say to them is ‘Give it to me. Give me your furniture, your clothes, your money. Give it all to me so that I can fix up my home for my family just like you did for yours.’”

A woman across the room jumps in. “My name is Judge Jesse. I like to give money away. I spend a lot of time figuring out who is worth it and who isn’t. Because, you know, not everybody is worth it. Some of these places take your money and waste it. It’s important to judge who is worth it and who is not. Of course, I really like being the one who gets to judge.”

“Welcome Jesse!”

A man from the back row introduces himself. “My name is Scar C.D. Say it fast and you’ll get a sense of who I am. I also like to give money away and I also like to judge who is worth receiving my gifts and who is not. But it’s not because I like to judge but because I just don’t believe I’ll have enough to go around. I can’t give to everybody and still have enough for my own needs as well.”

“Welcome Scar!”

A man looks like he wants to speak. I turn to give him a chance. It takes a few moments before he finds his voice.

“My name is Rich Worrier. I don’t like money. I don’t like this topic. I used to make \$6 an hour. I lived paycheck to paycheck. I had enough then. I even gave money away. But then I inherited

***Ten Thousand Idiots***

*It is always a danger  
To Aspirants  
On the  
Path*

*When they begin  
To believe and  
Act*

*As if the ten thousand idiots  
Who so long ruled  
And lived  
Inside*

*Have all packed their bags  
And skipped town  
Or  
Died*

- Hafiz

a lot of a lot of money. Now I wake up and the first thing I think about is money. I worry about what to do with it. I worry about how to protect it. I worry about whether I’m going to have enough. I didn’t worry about money when I didn’t have it. But now that I have it, I worry a lot.”

“Welcome, Rich.”

An attractive woman on the other side of the room interrupts.

“I am Cherry. And I’m really tired of people asking me for money. Everyone wants something from me. I’m sick of it. I’m

tired of having to give. These days, I just say no. I’m keeping it all for me. It’s all mine. Don’t touch it. Get away.”

One by one the money “sinners” introduce themselves. Some of the names are more creative than others. Some people enter into character more readily than others. A couple of people do not fully understand what we are doing, so they just listen. Others have a hard time staying in character, so they explain their money issues in a more linear way. Each comes as he or she is able. As we recognize ourselves in each other’s stories, we laugh. Sometimes we groan. When everyone who wants to has introduced themselves, I shift gears.

“The story we started with tells us that the sinners were the people that Jesus came to be with. These were the people that he shared meals with. And there were many sinners who followed him. Since we’re all here now, I think it’s safe to say that Jesus is here with us.

“If you would, take a moment to notice that presence with us. See if you can hear Jesus saying something. Or maybe you can see him doing something. Or maybe there is something that he would like to serve you. How do you sense Jesus’ presence here with us?”

A few share what they hear Jesus saying:

“Maybe you should look at people as people – not as rich people or poor people, but as people.”

“Enjoy me.”

“What part of the least of these did you not understand?”

“I forgive you.”

“Relax.”

One woman says she sees Jesus with a big grin on his face.

As people share their sense of Jesus’ presence with us, the energy in the room shifts. We are no longer in the tavern. We are in church.

The time has come for me to close. “Congratulations, everyone. We have just violated one of the taboos of our culture. We have talked about money in public. With so many sinners present, I’m not at all surprised that we were able to break the rules. Not only that, but we have been willing to talk about what’s really going on, playfully, creatively, avoiding the temptations of guilt and self-reproach, that so often sidetrack us when we try to get real about money and faith.

“More importantly we have been able to let Jesus see these parts of us – and love them. This is one of the most important pieces of working with money. Because we rarely get free by trying to be righteous. Instead, freedom comes when we are willing to admit that we’re not.

“Since my background is Catholic and since I know that Levi’s Table is really just a variation on confession, I feel a special responsibility to close our time together by giving you all penance. Here it is: Sometime during the next 24 hours, do two things with money. Do something wonderful for yourself and do something wonderful for someone else, preferably someone you would not ordinarily have contact with. Let these be expressions of letting money move through you in accordance with the flow of grace that is freely offered to you. Freely you have received, now go and freely give.”

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## background

Levi’s Table is a playful ritual that Harvest Time has learned to incorporate into its gatherings that explore wealth and Christian faith. What I have just described is a slightly fictionalized version of Levi’s Table. It’s fictionalized in the sense that while the characters are real “sinners” who have come to Levi’s Table, they were not all present at the Levi’s Table that I hosted in a bar in early March. In addition, while I have done my best to represent each character accurately, I am sure I missed some pieces of each one’s story. Still, I hope that the above vignette gives you a feel for what happens at Levi’s Table.

I was first introduced to Levi’s Table by Sharon Pavelda, a friend of mine who has a gift for creating and hosting playful “One Table” gatherings which welcome the outcasts within and without. Nearly three years ago, Sharon and her husband Randall Mullins, who was the Director of the Center of Contemplation and Nonviolence in Seattle at the time, helped

to organize a conference with Walter Wink on Jesus’ Third Way.<sup>1</sup> In the process of preparing for that conference, Sharon and Randall gave birth to a new ritual which invited people to embody their inner sinners. They called it “Levi’s Table” and began offering it to clergy and other groups. As they hosted this ritual, they realized that they were embodying that third way. They discovered that playfully welcoming our inner sinners is deeply connected to learning to love our enemies. (Matthew 5:44)

Shortly after this ritual emerged, Sharon began calling me, saying, “I need to do a Levi’s Table.” Familiar with Sharon’s method of inviting people to introduce themselves with a playful name, I would respond, “Great. Who are you today?” And she would introduce herself as Pissy Pat – or some similar name - and then proceed to tell me what was up for her – without worrying about being polite. Then, I would ask her how The Beloved was present to this part of her. Or we would unravel the piece of truth that her inner sinner knew.

Though I enjoyed these conversations, I did not initially appreciate the wisdom of our “Levi’s Tables.” I simply thought of them as a playful way of venting. But over time, I came to appreciate what a gift – and how rare - it was to have a place where I could be honest about what was going on inside of me without hearing the accusations of internal or external judges. Levi’s Table taught me to listen to all the voices within me and for what the voice of love has to say to me when I show up with the parts of me I am most tempted to deny.

In the process of practicing Levi’s Table, I came to recognize how often I confuse healthy spiri-

tuality and denial. I also became clearer about the ways that the sinful habits of our culture have taken root inside my being. Most surprisingly, Levi's Table taught me that parts of me that I label "sinful" often hold pieces of wisdom that I had learned to repress in order to fit into the patriarchal systems that formed me. Sometimes I even noticed that my sinfulness and gift are not nearly as distinct as I had tended to assume. In short, my Levi's Table conversations with Sharon gave me the gift of learning how to welcome all of me.

As I came to appreciate the wisdom of these conversations, I started to host Levi's Tables. Originally, I offered this ritual in the context of women's retreats. Then I started doing it with women at a local Catholic Worker house. More recently, I have hosted Levi's Tables at retreats and conferences for groups dealing with money and economic justice. The more I have practiced it, the more convinced I am that taking our place at Levi's Table is key to learning how to work with money with freedom and joy.

## Theological Background

Most of us who focus on the personal dimensions of the Gospel recognize that one of the things that happens at Levi's Table is that we are given an experience of the grace that is offered to us "while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8) We experience the gift of being seen and loved "in our mess." We feel the embrace of the Beloved who is not afraid to touch our infected wounds. We receive the healing that comes when we feel loved as we really are. We experience the freedom of knowing that we do not have to be perfect to be loved.

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This dimension of Levi's Table holds real power.

But Levi's Table is not just about personal healing and redemption. It is that. But implicit in the ritual is also a major challenge to the ways that a system of oppression can co-opt definitions of holiness in order to shut people out and keep people powerless.

So far in this essay, I have been using the word "sin" indiscriminately. Indeed, when I invite people to welcome their inner sinner, I deliberately do not define it too carefully because I want people to feel free to welcome whoever wants to come to Levi's Table. Once our inner sinner is present, then we can check our categorization.

In doing so, what I often find is that many of us have profound misunderstandings about sin. As Richard Rohr says, most of us confess the wrong sins.<sup>2</sup> For instance, we feel bad about the fact that we missed church on Sunday and completely ignore the ways that we participate in, support and benefit from economic structures

that kill. Or we feel guilty about that purchase we made the other day and do not recognize that so much of our money is invested in a system that promulgates injustice. Indeed, the tendency to overly focus on minor, personal sins can be a way that oppressive systems keep us from recognizing the deadly effects of the social sins of our culture and the ways we participate in them.

Something similar was happening at the time of Jesus. To see this, let us turn back to the text that we began with. The "sinners" mentioned in the Gospel reading – the people who joined Jesus at Levi's Table – were those who were considered unclean or impure according to the purity codes of Jesus' time. As Marcus Borg notes, they were people like tax collectors, lepers, people born with congenital illness and women.<sup>3</sup>

In his book, Meeting Jesus Again for The First Time, Borg explains that the dominant religious thinking of Jesus' time taught that holiness was assured by separating out that which was considered unholy.<sup>4</sup> One could be holy like God is holy, for instance, by staying away from that which was unclean. The fact that there were groups of people, things, times and places that were considered clean meant, of course, that were others that were considered unclean. The result of this way of thinking was a world of "sharp social boundaries" where entire groups of people were denied access to or kept subordinate within the community.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus radically challenged this whole system by embracing lepers and eating with sinners at places like Levi's Table.<sup>6</sup> Instead of cutting off that which was considered unclean in order to stay pure, Jesus practiced radical

welcome and compassion. That is to say that when Jesus sat down with the sinners, he was not just about helping people learn how to love themselves. He was challenging the religious system that maintained its power by categorizing entire groups of people as unclean.

At Levi's Table, Jesus set forth an entirely different model of holiness – one that is not about separation or being clean or pure – but about compassion.<sup>7</sup> As Jesus says in Matthew's version of the story, "Go and learn the meaning of the words I desire mercy not sacrifice." (Matthew 9:13)

Marcus Borg points out that the word that is usually translated as "mercy" in this text is more accurately translated as "compassion."<sup>8</sup> This word does not connote the power differential implied in the English word, mercy. Instead, it is deeply connected to the word that is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe God's "womb-like" love.<sup>9</sup> This kind of love – the kind that is rooted in our wombs or bowels – is what Jesus embodies at Levi's Table. This is the kind of love that he instructs the community to embody when he tells them to "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36).<sup>10</sup>

The implication is clear. What makes us holy is not cleanliness or separation from the impure. What makes us holy is compassion – the kind of compassion that welcomes the people that the dominant power structure marginalizes – the kind of compassion that welcomes the parts of ourselves that we most want to deny – the kind of compassion that flows from the depths of our beings. What makes us holy is taking our place at Levi's Table and meeting our brothers and sisters there.

## Implications For Working with Wealth

There are all sorts of implications to be drawn from Levi's Table. For the purposes of this newsletter, I am going to focus on what I have noticed happens when people who are trying to work with issues connected money and faith come to Levi's Table.

First, I have seen many people experience a deep sense of relief and joy when they feel grace offered to their money sinner. In one sense, this seems very simple. But in reality it is no small thing for those of us who are wealthy to be honest about where we are in need of grace – in public. The very culture of wealth teaches us to keep things tidy, to hold our cards close to our chest, to not "air our dirty laundry," to keep "private matters secret," to have it all together, to be strong and responsible, to be righteous, etc., etc.. In addition, the culture of some social justice circles demonizes those with wealth. Being honest about the issues we are working with is challenging for those of us who have learned how to "closet" parts of ourselves in order to fit in. Levi's Table bypasses the resistance we might feel to talking about the issues we struggle with by inviting us to "get in character" and introduce our inner sinners playfully.

Once those parts of us come out, then we can begin to experience the tenderness of the grace that embraces all of us. It is one thing to be loved when we are showing up with the ways in which we are brilliant when it comes to money. It is quite another to be loved when we are sharing the ways in which we are painfully addicted or completely caught in the grips of fear. Speaking these truths out loud in a circle

of friends who share our struggles is often a powerful experience of Christ's compassion.

This kind of compassion is sometimes the very grace we need to become free of fearful ways of working with money. For instance, being able to share our failings without being judged often makes it easier to drop our obsession with doing things right or demanding that others do the same. Similarly, being in touch with our own vulnerability and need for grace can deepen our desire to respond to God's invitation to share with those in need. In addition, learning to recognize how deeply we have internalized the oppressive thinking of our culture may lead us to acknowledge our need for community in discerning how to steward our wealth wisely.

There is something else that can happen at Levi's Table. Sometimes we find that our money sinners are sources of wisdom that we need in order to break out of a stifling way of working with money. For instance, those of us who have been schooled in the culture of wealth know that one of the primary rules of financial management is "don't touch the principal." But those of us who are trying to live our way into Gospel economics may find ourselves called to break that rule in order to get money flowing back into the world. When we take steps to do so, we often encounter resistance either from the parts of ourselves that accept the assumptions of the financial system, from our friends or families, or even from our financial advisors. In those moments, our inner rule breakers are wonderful allies. They bring a boldness that we need to challenge the unjust assumptions of our culture. Often, Levi's Table opens a door through which the outrageous and pro-

phetic holy guides that wait in the shadows of our beings choose to step.

Levi's Table also liberates us by getting us out of our heads. Using our minds is obviously an important and wonderful piece of journeying with money. But relying solely on our intellect eclipses other sources of wisdom. The "Holy Fool" wisdom of Levi's Table opens up these other sources. For instance, the invitation to get into character often restores our imagination's connection with the creativity of God. In addition, the invitation to play reconnects us with the joyful invitation behind Jesus' teachings on money. By tapping into our natural creativity and playfulness, Levi's Table opens up dimensions of our being that we desperately need in order to re-imagine liberating ways of using money.

Finally, one of the most powerful things that I have experienced at Levi's Table has happened not among the rich, but among those who are very poor. Once a week, I facilitate a simple ritual for women in transition at a local Catholic Worker house. From time to time, especially when I sense that we are all getting a bit "holy" I know it's time to host a Levi's Table to bring us back to reality.

Levi's Table nights at the Catholic Worker are always a lot of fun. There is something about listening to music and dressing up our sinful parts that seems to bring out the liveliest parts of us. On those nights when we have left who we think we are aside and are all confessing our mistakes, the lines that our culture sets up to separate us from each other disappear. For an hour, we are simply women sitting together at the Table – all of us deeply needing to

*"For an hour, we are simply women sitting together at the Table – all of us deeply needing to hear anew the voice of Love. The miracle is that we hear that voice through each other."*

hear anew the voice of Love. The miracle is that we hear that voice through each other. For me, this is one of the most revolutionary aspects of Levi's Table – its ability to cut through that which we think separates us in order to create a table where all are welcome.

## Conclusion

My friend, Randall, was there that night that I hosted Levi's Table in the bar. After everyone had left, we cleaned off the pool table altar and converted it back to its intended use. The bartender turned on the speakers to the juke box and Randall and I began to play pool. In the midst of that game, in the midst of a bunch of songs I did not recognize, I suddenly heard the horns signaling the beginning of a song I know well, "The Ring of Fire." In that moment, I heard the voice of the Beloved speaking through Johnny Cash – right to me – Fire E. Rose. I deeply received the gift of being surprised by the voice of The Beloved.

For me, that's one of the gifts of Levi's Table – the gift of being caught off guard by the voice of

Love spoken tenderly, personally, playfully and when I least expect it.

This is the gift that reminds me that's it is all gift. This is the gift that sets me free.



To continue this conversation or offer feedback, please contact Rose Feerick by phone or e-mail.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Wink, The Powers That Be (New York: Galilee, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr made this point during the opening lecture of his July 2005 conference on the Spirituality of the Twelve Steps.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Borg argues that "compassionate" is preferable to Matthew's redaction "perfect." See note on page 62.

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## **First Class**

**HARVEST TIME  
4950 CHERRY AVE., #13  
SAN JOSE, CA 95118**

### **UPCOMING EVENTS**

Often wealthy Christians who are asking questions about economic justice and who are trying to discern what God is calling them to do with their wealth lack spiritual community around these issues. Harvest Time gatherings provide opportunities for Christians of exceptional wealth to get to know each other and Harvest Time staff in order to nurture a growing network of support, encouragement, challenge, and inspiration as we strive to become more faithful disciples. Gatherings are also opportunities to ask the hard questions in an atmosphere of extravagant love.

#### **“Breathing Underwater: The Spirituality of the Twelve Steps”**

**November 10-12, 2006**  
Columbiere Conference Center  
Clarkston, MI

**November 17-19, 2006**  
Simpsonwood Conference  
& Retreat Center  
Atlanta, GA

For more information  
about these retreats, please visit  
our web site, or contact Rose  
Feerick or Bryan Sirchio.



### **HARVEST TIME STAFF**

**Rosemary Feerick**  
Co-Director  
4950 Cherry Avenue #13  
San Jose, CA 95118  
rfeerick2002@yahoo.com  
408-264-3039

**Bryan Sirchio**  
Co-Director  
P.O. Box 45236  
Madison, WI 53744-5236  
bsirch@sirchio.com  
608-251-0869

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*“The one who had gathered a large amount did not have too much, and the one who had gathered a small amount did not have too little. They so gathered that everyone had enough to eat.” Exodus 16:18*