

“Meeting Jesus at the Table: The Welcome Table”
Matthew 9:9-13

A few weeks ago, I was part of a meeting with youth and adults where we were invited to name someone we would like to have dinner with. It was fascinating to hear the responses which ranged from saints to celebrities. How would you respond? Who would you like to have dinner with? Maybe a harder question is this: Who would you not want to have dinner with?

As human beings, we have our likes and our dislikes. We have people we would like to welcome at our tables and there are others we would rather not share a meal with. This was certainly the case for the community of Jesus. There were people who were considered “sinners,” unworthy of love and welcome. But Jesus practiced radical welcome of all. In fact, one of the most common criticisms he received was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners, implying that Jesus was not keeping good company. He seemed to lack the important social standards to know who to have dinner with. As a rabbi, he was expected to have meals with pious people. Artist Kevin Burns wrote, “The Jesus of the Gospels did not spend his time with just one demographic group. He dined with tax collectors and also with respected Pharisees and elites.”

Let’s listen to the story for today from Matthew 9:9-13

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ ¹² But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

Even though we don’t like filing our taxes, tax collection is seen as an acceptable practice in our society today. We don’t think that the people who touch a dead body are unclean. There is no shame about working for the IRS. But such a job was considered bad during that time. Tax collectors (for the Roman government) were considered traitors and, because of the nature of Roman taxation, were believed to be corrupt and predatory. To associate with tax collectors who were considered sinners, and especially to eat with them, would compromise one’s purity. There was probably no person more despised by Jewish peasants than the tax-collector. This was because they were the representatives of the political and economic elite of both Israel and of Rome. The tax collectors lived among the people in each village and, in fact, grew up as part of the people. But they had chosen to betray the people by being the ones who collected the money that supported the Roman occupation, the landowners, and the clergy aristocracy. As a reward for their unsavory work, the tax-collectors were permitted to keep a significant percentage of the taxes for themselves; this, in turn, made tax-collectors among the wealthiest people in any village – but also the most despised. The people recognized that the “untouchables” or expendables of Israelite society (the widows, orphans, beggars, lepers, destitute) had all fallen into the expendable class by circumstance, whereas the tax-collector chose his ostracism out of his lust for money and power.

Jesus was plowing right upstream against a set of complex Jewish law and customs. The essence of faith was not a matter of what you believed, but of what you did. It was about how you observed the laws and practices. Jesus' attitude and actions seemed cavalier and insulting. We cannot assume that the Pharisees were a bunch of beady-eyed bigots. Most of them were sincere people struggling to live the way they thought God wanted them to live. The Pharisees might have responded very differently to Jesus' dinner with tax collectors. They too championed hospitality. But the rabbis had in mind hospitality to the pious poor, and taught, "Keep far from an evil neighbor and do not associate with the wicked." The Pharisees have a point about evildoers. They were upholding wisdom that has been gained painfully through the centuries. They do not want evil companions, and they do not honor evil people with their presence. They would not have criticized Jesus merely because he cared for the outcast, the poor, and the sinner. 'They too welcomed the repentant sinner.' What is new is that Jesus sought out and embraced the sinner. Jesus even selected one of them to be his disciple.

Jesus welcomed those who were excluded because he knew that once people experienced the fullness of God's grace, things would begin to change in them. We often think of transformation starting with the mind and that we can think our way out of our fears and destructive patterns. As Richard Rohr puts it, "We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking."

Our thoughts are often reflections of our egos and of our wounds in life. They make us think that we are separate from others. Only when we delve into our deep union with God, can we experience the truth of unity with all of life.

It is interesting that the table of Christ is often fenced by our human ideas of separation. Members of a church may feel more entitled than guests. Churches sometimes require baptism or membership in their tradition before welcoming others. Sometimes we may even feel like we are not worthy of receiving God's grace.

The invitation of the table of Jesus today is to embrace the mystery of the presence of Christ in each person. If we can develop that kind of vision, we can move beyond the illusions of separateness and fear.

Writer Barbara Brown Taylor imagines what the table of Christ looks like today. She imagines that it "might include an abortion doctor...an arms' dealer, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a Laotian chicken plucker, a teenage addict, and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers. Did I miss anyone? Don't forget to put Jesus at the head of the table, asking the young man to hand him a roll, please, and offering the doctor a second cup of coffee before she goes back to work.

If that offends you even a little, then you are almost ready for what happens next. Because what happens next is that the local ministerial association comes into the restaurant and sits down at a large table across from the sinners. The religious authorities all have good teeth and there is no dirt under their fingernails. When their food comes, they hold hands to pray. They are all perfectly nice people, but they can hardly eat their hamburger steaks for staring at the strange crowd in the far booth.

The chicken plucker is still wearing her white hair net, and the garbage collector smells like spoiled meat. The addict cannot seem to find his mouth with his spoon. But none of those is the heartbreaker. The heartbreaker is Jesus, sitting there as if everything were just fine. Doesn't he know what kind of message he is sending? Who is going to believe he speaks for God if he does not keep better company than that? I saw them eating and I knew who they were.

Any way you look at it, this is an alarming story. It is about hanging out with the wrong people. It is about throwing parties for losers and asking winners to foot the bill. It is about giving up the idea that we can love God and despise each other. We simply cannot, no matter how wrong any of us has been. The only way to work out our relationship with God is to work out our relationship with each other.

Like I said, Jesus told this story to the ministerial association that was complaining about his dinner parties. He told them he could not hear them all the way across the restaurant, that they should come over and pull up some chairs. Because he saw them eating and he knew who they were -- so clean, so right, so angry -- he wanted to help them too, so he said, 'Come meet my friends. Dessert is on me!' And as far as I know, he is still waiting to see how the story ends" with us!