

MEALS WITH JESUS: Grace

Luke 5:27-32

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I heard a joke once about a kindergarten teacher who gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. Each student was instructed to bring an object to share representing their faith tradition with the class.

The first student stood before the class and said, "My name is Benjamin, and I am Jewish, and this is a Star of David."

The second student got up and said, "My name is Mary. I'm Catholic, and this is a rosary."

The third student said, "My name is Sarah. I am Baptist, and this is a casserole."

It may be a joke, but a joke often has at least a little truth. We Baptists do love our food. A couple of weeks ago, I was visiting with someone about our installation service last week, and they asked, "Will there be food?" I wanted to respond, "Is water wet? Is the Pope Catholic? Will Baptist have food?" It was a no-brainer. Of course, we'll have food.

In every church I've attended or known, when we gather for things big and small, there is often food: donuts for Sunday School, desserts at Christmas, a fantastic spread at church celebrations and on Wednesday night by our Chef Michael. One of the two ordinances of this church involves a supper, the Lord's Supper.

You could say we simply love food. And that is true. But my spiritual answer is that we follow the ways of Jesus! And Jesus loved meals. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is nearly always going to a meal, coming from a meal, or eating at a meal. In Luke 7:34, Jesus says he, the Son of Man, has come eating and drinking, and he does so with unlikely folks. Because of it, the religious leaders call Jesus "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" To be called a glutton must mean a lot of meals.

A common theme of the Lukan Jesus is his enjoyment of meals and his friendship with the poor and the outcast. When Jesus ate with others, it wasn't just a meal. It was a reenactment of the Kingdom of Heaven among us where the table is set, all are welcome, and all are nourished by and through Christ. Throughout Luke's Gospel, there was always an excess of food and an excess of grace with Jesus, and they often happened simultaneously, like in today's story from Luke 5.

Our text today begins in verse 27: "After this, he [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi." When reading this, we should naturally wonder "after what?" What was the "this" that Jesus went out from?

Right before our text today is a story of a paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his friends and placed in front of Jesus, interrupting him as he taught. The paralyzed man's friends had carried him there because they had heard about the powerful, healing authority of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke tells us when Jesus saw the faith of the man's friends, the ones who brought him to Jesus and lowered him through the roof, Jesus told the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

The religious leaders present, devoted to the strict observance of the law of Moses, began to mutter, asking who is this who speaks blasphemies or such great disrespect against God? Only God can forgive sins and that comes only after a person has participated in cleansing rituals at the temple. That was the law. Overhearing them, Jesus responds, asking which is easier to do - to forgive sins or to tell him to get up and walk. And then to show Jesus's authority on earth to forgive sins, Jesus turns to the paralyzed man, instructing him to get up, take his cot, and go home. And the man did.

And verse 26 says, "Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, 'We have seen incredible things today.'" Notice that "things" are plural. They've witnessed not only the healing of this paralyzed man. They also witnessed the forgiveness of sins through the words of a man rather than through temple purity rituals.

Something new is in the air in the land of Galilee. Jesus is growing in popularity among the people, but so are his controversies with the religious leaders. They've heard him offer forgiveness for sins, which challenges the laws designed to keep God's people clean, set apart, and right before God. Now, Jesus will share a meal with those the religious community considered unclean, once again challenging the laws designed to keep God's people clean, set apart, and right before God.

After these "incredible things," verse 27 tells us Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, on the job at the tax-collection station, and Jesus called Levi as one of his first disciples. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Levi is referred to as Matthew, one of the twelve disciples. It is not his name that matters but his occupation.

In Jesus's time, tax collectors were the most despised of people, social outcasts for their professions. Roman authorities contracted the collection of taxes out to local tax collectors. Those local tax collectors were often fellow Jews, who collected excessive taxes from the people, often collecting extra for their pocket since there were few regulations. In addition, they were considered unclean by the Jews, because in collecting taxes, they interacted with Gentiles as well, and Gentiles were considered unclean. Even more, tax collectors were considered traitors against Israel and against God for collaborating with the enemy that oppressed God's people. So as unclean, greedy, traitors, it is easy to understand why tax collectors would have been outcasts among faithful Jews and why no respectable, law-abiding Jew would interact with them, let alone go to their house to share a meal with them and other sinners.

But Jesus did. After Jesus calls Levi to follow him, verse 28 tells us Levi got up, left everything, and followed him, and then "Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them."

Levi was a wealthy man to afford a great banquet for Jesus. Jesus didn't boycott the meal because of how Levi got his money. Levi gathered a great crowd of people, and we can assume it was a group of fellow tax collectors and other marginalized people. But Jesus didn't find an excuse to miss because of who would be at the meal. Levi, an outcast, invites the community of fellow outcasts, to share a table of grace with Jesus and to hear about the forgiveness Jesus can offer them, too. And Jesus eagerly accepts the invitation to share a meal together.

New Testament scholar Scott Bartchy wrote about the role meals played in the culture of Jesus's day. "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity. Thus, betrayal or unfaithfulness toward anyone with whom one had shared the table was viewed as particularly reprehensible. On the other hand, when persons were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation."ⁱ

Levi anticipated religious leaders refusing to even talk with him, looking at him with disgust and judgement. There was never an invitation to reconciliation, only guaranteed rejection. Yet, here comes Jesus of Nazareth, with healing abilities and authority to forgive, calling Levi to be one of his closets disciples. Jesus comes to his house and shares a meal with Levi and his friends, a sign of friendship, fellowship, and reconciliation. Levi's banquet opened the way to reconciliation with a group of outsiders that God's people had shut the door on. This is what Jesus was announcing when he walked among us. But the Pharisees weren't ready. While Luke's gospel refers to the partygoers as "tax collectors and others," the Pharisees refer to them as "tax collectors and sinners." Their intention is clear: these people are unclean, and our laws forbid us from sharing the intimacy of a meal with those who don't measure up to our standards of purity. They are enemies of God and God's people. God would surely not expect us to share a meal with these people.

Let's remember the context of this story. Right before Levi's dinner party, the paralyzed man's sins were forgiven by Jesus, not the purity rituals of the temple. Before that healing, Jesus touches and heals a leper, an unclean outcast, which would have made Jesus unclean. Now, he is dining in the home with a tax collector and his friends, also unclean outsiders. The old has gone, and something new is happening through the grace of Jesus. No longer is uncleanliness contagious. God's grace is contagious, and it is spreading.

In October 2010, author, pastor, and sociologist Tony Campolo spoke at this church and told the story of hosting a surprise birthday party for a prostitute in a Honolulu diner at 3:30 a.m.

He had visited the diner previously for a late-night coffee and donut when the diner suddenly swung open and, to much to his discomfort, marched eight or nine provocative and rowdy prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of Tony. Their talk was loud and crude. He felt completely out of place and was about to make his getaway when he overheard the woman beside him say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her friends gave her a hard time, asking what she wanted them to do about it. Sing Happy Birthday? Bake a cake?

She told them to knock it off. She was expecting nothing because she'd never had a birthday party before and didn't expect one now.

Maybe it was the late hour or the bad donut talking, but Tony hatched a plan with the owner. After confirming the girls came in each morning at about that same time, Tony invited the owner, Harry, and his wife to help him throw a surprise 39th birthday party for Agnes. And they were all in, offering to bake the cake, make the food, and get the word out.

The following day at 2:30 a.m., Tony showed up with some crepe-paper decorations at the store and a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" The word certainly got out because it was wall-to-wall prostitutes and Tony in that diner that early morning.

At precisely 3:30 a.m., the door to the diner swings open, and Agnes, the birthday girl, walks in. She is stunned and moved to tears when the people along the counter start singing "Happy Birthday." She openly weeps at the sight of the gorgeous white cake adorned with 39 flaming candles.

Agnes clutches the cake as if it were the Holy Grail. Never in her life has anyone given her a birthday party. Then, instead of cutting the cake, she asks to take it home and keep it for a while because she's never had a birthday cake. After she leaves with the cake, everyone stands in stunned silence until Tony offers a prayer for Agnes.

When Tony finished, Harry leaned over the counter, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No, you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Jesus would throw 3:30 a.m. birthday parties for prostitutes. Jesus attended dinner parties with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus called a hated tax collector to be part of his inner circle, his closest disciples.

Jesus was announcing a new way when he walked among us, and it challenged the religious then and even now. Robert Karris says, "In Luke's Gospel, Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate." In his book, "A Meal with Jesus," Tim Chester compares the old way and the new way that Christ was announcing. The new way in the kingdom of God is gracious rather than religious, inclusive rather than exclusive, welcoming rather than unwelcoming. It is characterized by feasting rather than fasting, rejoicing rather than grumbling. It recognizes its need and finds hope in the Savior rather than feeling self-righteous, rejecting the Savior. Look at these two lists: gracious, inclusive, welcoming, feasting, rejoicing, and recognizing your need, compared with religious, exclusive, unwelcoming, fasting, grumbling, and self-righteous.ⁱⁱ

Are you living as someone who belongs to the new way? Are we, as a church, living as a church that belongs to the new way?

Each Wednesday at our 5 p.m., our Fellowship Hall hosts community and unhoused friends as well as members and attendees of this church for a meal. Gathered around our tables are people who struggle with lying, greed, addiction, selfishness, and judgment. And that is just us church folks. I don't know what our community friends struggle with, but I'd guess we have much more in common than we think.

Our text today ends with these words from Jesus in vv. 31-32. "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." This verse is given by Jesus in response to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law's question as to why Jesus and His disciples would eat and drink with such "sinners". Their attitude revealed their belief that they were above associating with those whom habitually and horribly "miss the mark." It never occurred to them that the self-righteousness and smugness in their own hearts was a sign of sickness in God's sight too. When Jesus spoke to them, he allows them and us to decide whether we are well or sick, saint or sinner. What Jesus doesn't allow is for us to sit on the sidelines. We're either at the table with Jesus, tax collectors, and sinners, or we're among the critics.

When Tony threw that early morning birthday party in Honolulu for those judged and excluded from society, he set the table for a meal of grace with Jesus. And as the owner, Harry, said, "If there was a church like that, I'd join it." Is this church the kind of church Harry and Agnes would join? If not, what would it look like to be such a church? What would it look like for you to host a meal of grace with Jesus for those in your life who, like us, need to know the grace of Christ? Jesus came for all of us. He calls each and everyone of us to repentance. The Greek word for repent is *metanoia* – me TAHN noy uh. The closest literal English meaning of the word is to have a change of mind, but might be better said, "to think differently afterwards" or "changing your mind after being with." To repent means to be convinced of another way, to change your mind or convictions. And in response to be convinced in your mind and heart, to change your actions. Repentance means turning from going your own way to going God's way.

Jesus was inviting those early religious leaders to repent, to change their mind, to think and act differently about what is clean and what is unclean, about how – or rather WHO – makes us right before God. Jesus was also inviting Levi and the tax collectors to repent, to think differently and act differently about their profession and treatment of others.

Jesus invites us to repentance, too. All of us. Each and every day. It is not one and done. Maybe we need to think and act differently toward a group of people or an individual that we've shut doors to. Maybe we need to think and act differently about how we treat others. Maybe we need to change our mind about going our own way and trust, again or for the first time, that life is better and more abundant with Jesus.

Church, may we, as a church and as individuals, be known for throwing birthday parties for those who feel forgotten and cast aside by the world. May we welcome and widen the table of grace as Christ has taught us to do.

Melissa Hatfield © 2023

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Chester, T. *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table*. Crossway, 2011, 19.

ⁱⁱ 26.