



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 11, 2023
HOSEA 5:15-6:6; PSALM 50:7-15; ROMANS 4:13-25; MATTHEW 9:9-13,18-26

DINING ACROSS THE DIVIDE¹

Matthew 9:9-13,18-26 [*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. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.]*

One Thursday evening, back at the end of April, a restaurant in Barcelona, Spain took a mysterious last-minute booking for a 'special reservation.'² The staff there were stunned when the guests finally walked in, they'd taking a booking for President Barak

Obama... Steven Spielberg, the film director... and American music legend "The Boss". Obama, Spielberg, and Bruce Springsteen, an unlikely trio if ever there was one, sat down at a table together to eat – causing quite the kerfuffle in the process!

¹ The title of this sermon was inspired by a series of the same name run in *The Guardian*, in which people with different political beliefs sit down for a meal together. Read more here: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/dining-across-the-divide>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/28/dream-dinner-party-guests-obama-springsteen-and-spielberg-delight-barcelona-restaurant-staff>

A classic question of interviewers, or amongst friends, is who would be your fantasy dinner guests. You might not choose these three... but folks often opt for key historical figures, movie stars, great musicians, or artists. But this thought experiment rarely goes past the fun and amusement of putting together the guest list. The conversation that might follow, the way each may relate to the other, that's not part of the fantasy. The fantasy is the idea of the gathering, not the gathering itself. The fantasy feels good, is full of possibility, the realities and difficulties of such a gathering are left unexplored.

When we hear the Gospel stories of Jesus sitting down for dinner with different people, today with tax collectors and sinners, what kind of scene do we imagine? A large, rambunctious gathering? Lots of smiling faces? Plenty of food to share, laughter, animated conversation, perhaps? That's all possible, but given the realities of the time, the divisions of the time, the very real pressures of life at that time – an easy flow of conversation with plenty of good humor seems unlikely.

Although we can't know for sure, there's no reason to assume that a gathering of tax

collectors, and those identified as sinners, along with the disciples, and Jesus, there's no reason to assume such a gathering would have been all fun and games. Just as there's no reason to assume that organizing a meal like this today would be much of an easy good time.

Let's be clear: this isn't a gathering of the poor, of desperate children and widows, of the sick and destitute, those who had nothing, who lived on the very edge of survival. This meal is not to be understood as an act of service or charity.

The people who came to eat with Jesus that day, the tax collectors and the sinners, each hold a very real place in the system, in the society of the time. New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine says a modern analogy for the sinners mentioned in this context would be international drug dealers, white-collar insider traders, sex traffickers, arms dealers, quite the crew – she says the term best describes people who have willingly separated themselves from the welfare of the community,³ for profit. We might think of them as people who have consciously decided to make their own way, hold a certain kind of power on their own terms, build their own wealth knowing what they were doing was

³ In various places, incl: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, NRSV Version, 2nd Edition. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler Eds., (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2017), 28, 108.

inherently wrong and damaging the lives of the community, the society they were part of.

The tax collectors, agents of the state, and these sinners likely have more than sufficient means, but the ways in which they've chosen to live – specifically, in ways that harm their community - means they are excluded, cast out, separated from the life of the whole. Being mindful of the historical context here can prevent us drifting too far away from the real impact this scene would have had on those in the community working hard to do the right thing.

These are not fantasy dinner party guests, and such a table was alarming to those who witnessed it. Alarming and scandalous. Jesus, the disciples, eating a meal with agents of the oppressive regime, cheek by jowl with some of the most dangerous, least scrupulous, and unethical individuals you might imagine. Who is this Jesus? What on earth is he attempting to do?

We must put ourselves in the Pharisees' place in this story and imagine, really try to feel how we each might respond if confronted by a sight so scandalous. The Pharisees see Jesus, the learned rabbi, so knowledgeable about the scriptures, clearly a powerful healer, one with surprising wisdom and clarity of understanding when it comes to the law, this

Jesus is breaking bread with the very people who are tearing society apart.

The Pharisees, understandably aghast at what they're witnessing, ask the disciples what in the heck is going on, why is Jesus eating with these people?

Coming as it does, in the midst of a string of healing stories, this, we must assume, is also a story of healing.

Healing – because nowhere in it do we hear Jesus chastise or blame those in his company, neither here does he judge or shame them, instead all we're told is that he sits with, and he eats with those who came for dinner at the house. Jesus connects, he intentionally connects with the most unlikely crew. For sure, these are not Jesus' fantasy dinner guests, rather, this a gathering, an act born out of covenantal love, for God and for neighbor, for *all* neighbors. This is no act of service, but an intentional healing act, a prioritization of connection, through which the healing presence of God may flow out into the world.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, "You've heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be

children of your Father in heaven.”⁴

... this is what that healing love can look like, it's bold, it's unexpected, it's likely all around quite uncomfortable and hard, but it was... and *is*, so very needed. Necessary.

Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners that we might know the true healing power of connection, perhaps especially with those we might avoid, with those we might not choose to be with and come to know, the healing is in connections we might think are impossible or pointless. Because in and through connection sought out and motivated by

love, as Christians we believe, *there* is the healing power of God.

This table fellowship is not the stuff of fantasy, but of covenant faithfulness, it is not about the ideal gathering but about the healing that's possible when divided, separated people gather and connect.

We do this every Sunday when we gather around this table, and... we must do this, also, out there, in the world.

⁴Matthew 5:43-45a



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