

Genesis 18: 1-15  
Romans 5: 1-8  
Matthew 9: 9-17

“Why Does He Eat With Them?”

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This time of year, as you know, is the season of graduations and commencements. For many ages: 6<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, high school, college and on up through the levels of high academic achievement. And people make speeches. I often feel sorry for people who have to speak, because how many deep and original things can you say on these occasions?

“Congratulations.” “Do well.” “Remember the lessons.” The writer Kurt Vonnegut was often asked to speak at college ceremonies, and I think he managed to say things that were really pretty original and thought-provoking. Back in 1974 in his commencement address at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, he said, “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

Now, Kurt Vonnegut was not a religious person, but I think that this is one of the most clear and concise statements about the purpose and calling of religious institutions that I can remember. It is something that Jesus might have understood, as he wandered around Galilee. He would have particularly recognized the “daring” part of the work: how much controversy it can cause just to create new community.

And it seems that Jesus created community in two steps: he would call someone, like Matthew, and say “Follow me.” Then he would sit down for a meal. There was no interview process. There was no list of skills needed. Just “Follow me and let’s eat.”

There is a wonderful painting by Caravaggio of the Call of St Matthew. Jesus is a rather shadowy figure. He seems to have just entered a dark room where several richly dressed men are counting money, but St. Peter is in the way and we can’t see Jesus’ face well. We do see his arm outstretched, pointing right at Matthew. Matthew is caught in mid-gesture, his right hand still touching the coins, left hand gesturing to himself, as if to ask, “Do you mean **me**? And do I have to let go of this money?” He is surprised to be invited into the circle around Jesus.

But what really cements the deal is the meal. Apparently, when you are called, you have to have Jesus over for dinner with a few friends. It’s what you do.

Now, at this point, we were already aware that this itinerant rabbi had a soft spot for poor people and suffering people, for the leper and the demon-possessed. We knew that, so we were beginning to get a sense of the new community being gathered. But now he is called someone who has plenty of money, and, as far as we can tell, no physical problems. Matthew does have a teeny tiny ethical problem, though. He works for the Romans, collecting taxes, probably customs tariffs. In the occupied nation of Israel, Roman rule was an always visible and ever-present source of anger and humiliation, from the sight of soldiers on the street to those Jewish tax collectors (or collaborators) in all the towns. Tax collectors like Matthew were “sinners” because they continually defiled themselves working with Gentiles and because they were part of the chain of oppression. A chief tax collector would bid for the privilege of collecting money or tariffs, and then

he would do everything he could to make good on it, with extra for himself. All the employees, like Matthew, would be pressured to extort more than was fair, on the front lines of interacting with the people, and they were notoriously dishonest. You could actually feel pretty good about excluding them.

For the people of Jesus' time, and to some extent for people in many parts of the world today, every act of table fellowship was a guarantee of trust, peace, and brotherhood. And if you only ate with people just like yourself, who kept the same rules about diet and cleanliness and lifestyle, who used the right fork, it was more pleasant and orderly. The world made some kind of sense and chaos and threat stayed outside. Hence the logical question from the Pharisees (and, I suspect, from the disciples themselves) why would Jesus eat with tax collectors?

When this Gospel was written, and this story first told, the question of whose table you shared was a active, burning issue for those who were forming "stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured," to quote Vonnegut. Many people who had felt estranged from God, who were sinners and knew it, who experienced the disease of aimlessness and isolation, were drawn to the words and example of Jesus. So this story explained: Jesus calls you and wants to sit down with you. In other words, we are all in this together, whether we knew it before or not, we are all sinners, whether we knew it or not, and this is exactly where you belong. Supposedly, St. Augustine called the church a "hospital for sinners." St Chrysostom later said, "The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins." Abigail Van Buren of Dear Abby fame built on this and said, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." So, welcome to the hospital, friends! You're in good company here.

Pope Francis, in 2013, took this idea a little further and said: "I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up."

Some priests in the Catholic Church have taken this advice to heart, taking daring steps to create community. Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark opened the door of the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart to a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics from the greater New York area. He spoke to them personally and said, "I am Joseph, your brother. I am your brother, as a disciple of Jesus. I am your brother, as a sinner who finds mercy with the Lord." And then they shared the holy meal of the Mass.

For some of us, reaching across the divide to the LGBTQ community is not a big stretch. We take for granted that they are welcome at God's table and in our community. But still there are people we'd rather not sit down with: either people who stand in some way for oppression, like the tax collector, or people who are just plain difficult. What we need to remember is that they are exactly the people to whom Jesus speaks, "Follow me." They are like Matthew, those people who have one hand counting money and the other gesturing towards themselves in disbelief. We have this in common with them. That gesture, that question in Matthew's eyes, is something we all share. It is another way of asking, "Am I chosen? Am I loved?"

In St. Paul's theology, found in the letter to the Romans, we hear another angle of this. Paul speaks of "access to the grace in which we stand" and "God's love being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." And he makes clear that this was not a reward for moral achievement: it is a free gift "while we were yet sinners" and remains a free gift while we are still sinners. It answers the unspoken question, "Am I chosen? Am I loved?" with a resounding, "Yes, follow me." Follow Jesus into the place where all sinners can gather for a meal and for mutual healing.

Fred Berthold, a professor of religion who used to attend this church, once gave me a definition of a Christian: A Christian is a forgiven and forgiving sinner. Some are uncomfortable with a lot of talk about sinners: it sounds kind of puritanical and judgmental. Until we remember who gets invited to the meal with Jesus. I don't want to be so righteous that I don't get the invitation to Matthew's house. Imagine that strange collection of people there: fishermen and tax collectors and who knows whom else. All called with a voice of love to sit down and eat and talk together. Maybe they learned something they hadn't heard before, like what it was to be a Galilean fisherman and pay outrageous taxes, or what it was like to be shunned by your neighbors for making money. The feast for sinners or a hospital for sinners, can be a real education.

Long ago, I remember hearing about a program of the Vermont Department of Corrections. The St Johnsburry Correctional facility would send group of inmates to work on the Atkinson Retreat Center, which used to belong to the VT Conference. The director of the Center would ask churches for donations of food, plus people to keep the inmates company while they did maintenance work on the building. The director noted that meal time was really important for these men: for some of them it was one of the few times that they tried to use table manners and have table conversation and eat in a family environment and be treated like regular people. She also said that almost none of the men who work at the Newbury Center committed crimes again and returned to prison. It was the power of the feast of sinners, which Jesus, in his wisdom, handed down to us.

The Atkinson Retreat Center is no more, but we still have a similar opportunity closer to home, at the Dismas House in Hartford. Once a month, we demonstrate our gratitude that, while we were yet sinners, Jesus invited us into community. We demonstrate the joy of being chosen and loved. We offer a cure for the terrible disease of loneliness.

In our gospel reading, we hear, through the lens of a story about Jesus, about the beginnings of the church. We learn that it begins with calling and loving. We learn that it is not an exclusive club or a homogenous gathering, because that does not offer the healing we need. We learn that it is not a school of moral achievement in which some students win graduation prizes. It is a hospital for sinners...maybe even a field hospital, as Pope Francis says, for seriously wounded people. And the cure is not their own inner resources but the healthy medicine of divine grace, administered by a loving community. And we read the Bible here not as a self-help manual for personal improvement or personal salvation, but as the Good News of God's tender care and challenging call.

The truth is, in the gospels, Jesus never seems to be calling people inside the holy places, where everyone is well-behaved and well-adjusted and self-sufficient. He's out there, out walking on the shore of the sea, walking in noisy crowds, walking by the customs booth, walking in the slums, in the ruins of bombed buildings. He is sitting at counter tables in the segregated South. He is standing in line at the community dinners in White River. That's where he does his calling and his feasting. And that's where I want to be, so he can call me too. I hear Jesus calling even to me,

because I need it. And it makes me want to give a party. I am going to give a dinner for Jesus. Who should I invite? I think I'll invite the transgender pastor and a homophobic member of a conservative church. I'll invite the soldier and the pacifist. And the singer in the Gospel choir and the young man who paints graffiti on her church. And the businessman who makes gobs of money from his factory in Indonesia and the 14-year-old girl who works there. Maybe I'll invite you. Then, in the presence of Jesus, they and we can all get a chance to listen to each other. I don't want to be on the outside when that happens. I want to be in there. I don't care what's on the menu. As long as God is there, calling and healing and forgiving and transforming. See you there.