

“Making Room Around the Table”

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¹³Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. ¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Mark 2:13-17)

In the world of first-century Palestine, a table was much more than a place to eat dinner. The family table was a symbol of fellowship, kinship, and community.¹ So, when Jesus and Levi sat down together to share a meal, each was literally and figuratively welcoming the other person into his social and religious circle. Before they sat down, before they took even their first bite of the meal, each of these men had decided he would make room in his life for the other.

For Jesus, that would have been a momentous and potentially costly decision, because faithful, Torah-following Jewish people would have been taught from childhood to see Levi as someone who was socially, economically, and ritually unclean. We are told in the story that Levi earned his living as a keeper of one of the many toll booths run by Herod along the highways, bridges, and rivers of the realm. Acting on behalf of his Roman overlords, Herod would have exacted payment from anyone passing by. This would have put Levi in regular contact with all kinds of people that proper Jewish types would have considered undesirable and unclean.

Just imagine one of the toll booths at the George Washington bridge. On any given day, the average toll worker comes into contact with all kinds of people – rich and poor, locals and foreigners, the freshly-showered and the not-so-freshly showered... some healthy people and some coughing, runny-nosed people... some in brand new Mercedes-Benzes, others in high-mileage AMC Pacers. At the end of most days, Levi would have been coated in the dust and grime of the road.

But the physical uncleanness would not have been his only issue. The higher-ups in the toll collection game tended to be knights or other wealthy, connected Romans, but the fat-cats depended on locals – subordinates in the various territories who were willing to do the gritty work of actual collections.² In Jewish Palestine, the locals who conspired with these Roman racketeers were vilified as sell-outs and traitors. Many of them were rapacious, dishonest, and ruthless people, but even the few who were honest were social pariahs.

¹ Brian K. Blount, “The Apocalypse of Worship,” in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, Brian K. Blount and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 20.

² Cambridge Bible Commentary, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mark/2-15.htm>.



The idea that a teacher and preacher like Jesus would sit at table with someone like Levi would have been virtually unthinkable. As we read, the Pharisaical referees immediately blew their whistles and threw their penalty flags, but it is likely that even Jesus' disciples would have winced at the decision, especially the fishermen who resented the costly fishing license fees and taxes on their daily catch that people like Levi would routinely collect. Remember that this is very early in Jesus' ministry, but here he is already signaling that around his table – in the fellowship and kinship community that he was creating – everyone would be welcome... not just the healthy, clean, relatively-righteous people, but people that we might consider to be sick -- publicans and tax collectors, harlots and thieves, lepers and people with illnesses no one even understood at the time. Most of us are pretty choosy about the people we are willing to welcome into our homes and around our tables. But it is clear that Jesus isn't looking for preference, prestige, or good publicity.³ He is ready to welcome everyone around his table.

And what about Levi? This is not the easiest decision for him either. As the story goes, Levi had not even been listening to Jesus along the lakeshore. Levi has been in his toll booth all day – just doing his job and minding his own business -- when Jesus and his entourage walk by. Jesus invites Levi to come and follow him. We don't know if it was quitting time or not. We just know that Levi left... and that sometime shortly thereafter, he invites this man he has just met to share a meal with him in his home. Levi is open and receptive enough to want to listen to what Jesus has to say, and also daring enough to make room for Jesus at his own table.

Just as those walking with Jesus may not have been so enthusiastic to sit down with Levi, Levi's crew probably didn't take too kindly to Jesus crashing their meal either. My guess is that "publicans and tax collectors" tended to stick together, because as people considered to be turncoats and money-grubbers in their own neighborhoods, they probably didn't have many other friends. Nobody else had their backs. Meals together were likely one of the few safe spaces in their lives. So, bringing an outsider into that insular crowd was a huge risk.

This radical welcome of Jesus – the attitude that everyone is always welcome around Christ's table – is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, we love it, because it means that we ourselves are always welcome there, not matter how we may have failed, or erred, or fallen short. But it also means that everyone else is welcome too, and that second edge quickly reveals what scholar Jerry Irish describes as "our own social stratification, our own covert purity system."⁴ Whether we are aware of it or not, we have all drawn our own boundaries about who is OK to talk with, who is OK to hang out with, and who is OK to bring into our homes. These rules are written by time and experience and what we come to think of behavioral choices other people make. Those lines also tend to move with our risk tolerance – how worried and anxious we may be, or how curious and daring. We all draw lines around the people we are comfortable being with, and the people we are not. So, when it comes to pulling a chair up at the Lord's Table, we celebrate that we always have a seat, but we have to understand that we cannot really control who might pull a chair up next to us.

³ https://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2009-11-01.

⁴ Jerry Irish, "Theological Perspective" on Mark 2:13-22, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 406.

On this World Communion Sunday, this theology of Christ's table is elevated and takes center stage. As many tables around the globe mystically become one through the power of the Holy Spirit, tax collectors are sitting at table with the people they tax, police officers are sitting with people they put behind bars, Russians are sitting at table with Ukrainians, people are sitting with the spouse who divorced them, victims of violence are sitting with their abusers. It can pretty uncomfortable pretty fast, this theology of radical inclusion.

And not all of us will come to this table today with the same understandings. Some Christian traditions treat these elements very differently than we will today. Through the centuries Christians have argued about the nature of the bread and the cup, how the sacrament should be prepared and served and handled. Some traditions treat the elements as so precious that they fence off access to the table, so that only certain persons can come to the meal. Our faith does not see it that way, and that's one of the things I love about the Reformed tradition. As a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I studied and prepared to preside over these meals. In seminary we learn the words to say and the actions to take, and in our ordinations we are, in some ways, charged with defending the order and sanctity of the Lord's Table. But it is not our job to guard it. In fact, I see our role as quite the opposite. Our role is to share this table, and share this meal, with anyone who may be hungry, anyone who may be seeking, anyone who is even the slightest bit curious about who Jesus really is and why his love is so wide, and so deep, that everyone is always welcome at His table.

Some of our best thinking on this matter is reflected in our *Book of Order*, which does have some rules in it, but is really more about what we believe and why. This is what we say about this meal we are about to share not only with those gathered here, but with people gathered across the world today:

*"The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding."*⁵

This table is set for you, and me, and everybody. It is not a table just for people who are healthy, wise, powerful, or rich, any more than it is a table just for the sick, the confused, the weak, or the poor. Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are, however you are, we will make room for you. We do not check your credentials at the door. We do not charge admission, and we don't save seats. Because this is not our table. It is the Lord's Table, and he has told us very clearly that all are welcome.

Thanks be to God, for this gift of love and inclusion. **Amen.**

⁵ PC(USA) *Book of Order*, W-3.0409.