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Still Eating with Sinners:
Jesus' Meals & the Lord's Supper

a sermon on Luke 5.27-32
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When we think about the Lord's Supper and where it comes from, we think about the Last Supper. "On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread ..." We know the Last Supper was a Passover meal, so we know the Lord's Supper has some roots there. But there are other roots we maybe have not noticed. Standing behind the Lord's Supper, helping us understand what it means, is the unique way Jesus used meals in his ministry.

Meals for Jesus were more than a time to rest and eat. In fact, they meant a lot more than that for everyone back then. For most people, meals were very important because the company you kept at meals had everything to do with where you stood in society. To eat with someone meant that this person was your kind of person, your class, your ilk. That's why Jews never ate with Gentiles. The rich didn't eat with the poor. Religious people did not eat with sinners. Keep in mind the Pharisees were not using the word *sinners* in the way we usually do, meaning that all human beings fall short of the standards set by our Holy God. For them "sinner" was a label to stick on people who failed to live up to the community's religious and moral standards. Respectable people did not eat with folks like that.

So meals were one more way to reinforce social structure. Who was in, who was out, keeping the outsiders out and the insider in – that's what meals were for. For most people anyway ... Jesus was different. Jesus made meals a *living parable*. He and his dining companions were acting out a story. It was a story about grace and the good news of God's kingdom. That's what Jesus always preached: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News." When he was at table, Jesus put his message in practice. Jesus loved a good meal. He loved a party. For him, these meals were like that party the father threw for the prodigal son at the end of that parable. Remember how the father ordered the fatted calf killed and threw a party to celebrate his son's return? The older brother got mad. You know where Jesus got the idea for that story? From his own experience! Our scripture reading today is the real life version of it. For Jesus, these meals were a celebration of forgiveness and new life. They were an anticipation of God's kingdom. And they gave a glimpse of what life in the kingdom will be.

Jesus' meals were living parables. They told a story in which those who were outside could come in. Those who had wandered in the far country could come home. And at the same time, some of those who thought they were inside – they thought they were righteous – were not. They were on the outside too, needing grace. And grace was available for them, if only they would receive it. If only they could see the truth, repent, and join the party.

Let's look closer at our text. Levi was a tax collector. You need to understand why everyone hated them. The way taxes worked in the Roman Empire was: The government put the job of collecting taxes up for bid. Let's say a guy bid \$1,000,000 for the job of collecting tolls on a certain bridge. He won the bid. Now he owes Rome \$1,000,000, but he can collect tolls to get it. He doesn't do this himself, mind you. He lives somewhere else. He hires others to do it. Let's say Levi is one he hires. He tells Levi, charge everyone \$2 to cross the bridge, that way I'll have \$2,000,000 by the end of the year. He's just made a million. Levi, of course, charges people \$2.50. So tax collectors were dishonest. They collaborated with the Roman occupation. They got rich off their neighbors. You can see why people hated them.

Jesus calls Levi – also known as Matthew, as in the gospel of Matthew – to become a disciple. Levi does. And in his excitement over his new life, in his enthusiasm to introduce his old friends to Jesus, he throws a big party. Jesus is the guest of honor. The Pharisees and the scribes, uptight religious types obsessed with their social standing, can't believe it. Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners! They complain about it, just like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus answers 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 to repentance."

This is not the last time Jesus ate with sinners. And it was not the last complaint he heard. In fact, Jesus' critics criticized him so much for his table ministry that Jesus lodged his own complaint against them: "John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" [Lk 7.33-34].

As we think of the meals Jesus ate, we might also think of Zacchaeus, who was a lot like Levi. Jesus changed his life. The meal Jesus ate with him was a new life party, a forgiveness party, a kingdom of God party. Of course, Jesus also ate with Pharisees. He was not discriminating in the company he kept at meals. Everyone else was so exclusive, but Jesus ate with both sinners who knew they were sinners and sinners who thought they were holy. More than once he ate in homes of Pharisees.

He ate with his disciples and friends too. Think of the meal Mary, Martha, and Lazarus threw for him in Bethany. Think of the Last Supper.

Not only did Jesus use meals as living parables, he also told parables about them. What is the kingdom of heaven like? Jesus said it is like a banquet or a wedding party. Only the way Jesus tells it, the party is open to everyone. Anyone can become his disciple. Anyone can receive forgiveness and new life. Anyone with a heart for God can enter the kingdom just by believing in Jesus.

OK, then, when we think about the Lord's Supper and what it means, we have to think about more than the Last Supper, more than the Passover, we ought also to keep in mind the meals Jesus ate that were living parables of the kingdom. Very well, how does this help us understand the Lord's Supper we are about to celebrate?

The most important thing is this: The Lord's Supper is a celebration. When the prodigal son returned home, his father threw a party. The Lord's Supper is like that. It celebrates the new life we have through Christ. Yes, it is about his death. It has to be. His death made forgiveness possible. He took the punishment that should have been ours. By paying for our sins himself, he could both condemn sin, and thus establish justice, and also forgive us. So the cross makes both justice and grace possible at the same time. So yes, this meal commemorates his death. No doubt about that. Without his death, there would be no grace, no forgiveness, no reason to have a party. So we must remember his death. Yet as we do so, we *give thanks* for all the blessings it has brought us. You ought to eat and drink with a feeling of freedom and heart full of gratitude and joy. You were the prodigal, and this is your party.

We remember Jesus' death, and we also celebrate his resurrection. The cross and resurrection always go together. I love John's gospel. The other three gospels emphasize that Jesus died *for sin*. John comes at it the other way around. John emphasizes that Jesus died *for life* — that is, so that we might have life. There is no contradiction here. The first three point to the means: Jesus died *so that* our sin could be forgiven, *so that* we could have life. John points to the result: Because Jesus died for sin, we can have life.

The Lord's Supper is a celebration, and that affects our tone, our attitude, as we receive it. We need both reverence and joy. That's a tough balance, but we have to try. Reverence is essential. After all, Jesus is our host. He is also our guest of honor. We are remembering his death. At the same time, however, we are celebrating the new life his gives, and as Levi and Zacchaeus would tell you if they were here, you can't do that without great joy!

Some of you may have grown up in churches where the Lord's Supper had the somber demeanor of a funeral. The organ played dirge-like music. An uneasy hush rested over the congregation. Two men in dark suits lifted a white cloth from over the table and folded it like soldiers folding a flag from a coffin. This would all make sense if the

meaning of this meal were, "Jesus is dead." But that's not the meaning, and it is not even true. Jesus is not dead anymore. Jesus died, and he rose, and he lives and reigns forever. That's the message of this meal.

A pastor who grew up in a church like that and was serving a church like that had never known anything else. The Lord's Supper was like a funeral. He decided to preach through the book of Acts. He wanted to show his church how the apostles did things. He never dreamed his own practice of the Lord's Supper would be challenged. Then one week he came to Acts 2.46, which describes life among the first Christians. It says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and joyful hearts." In the book of Acts, "breaking bread" usually refers to the Lord's Supper. They did not have church buildings; they met together in homes. This is talking about the Lord's Supper. These first Christians ate it with glad and joyful hearts. "How can that be?" the pastor wondered. His church never had joy or gladness when they broke bread. What did this mean? That little discovery started him on a journey deeper into the meaning of the Lord's Supper. He came to recognize that remembering Jesus' death is a joyful occasion because Jesus' death gives us life.

My own experience was not entirely different from that. I do not think the church of my childhood intentionally gave the Lord's Supper a funereal tone. It was not so somber as that. But it was somber. If you think about the balance between reverence and enthusiastic joy as a scale, we definitely tipped too far on the side of reverence. I think most churches that lack good balance err on the side of reverence. There probably are churches that go too far with joy, but I haven't seen them. Anyway, I was in chapel one day at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. We would receive the Lord's Supper by intinction, so we filed up to the front. As we did we sang. And on this one day, we sang, "I will enter your courts with thanksgiving in my heart. I will enter your courts with praise. I will say, 'This is the day that the Lord has made.' I will rejoice for he has made me glad." At the time I could not explain it, but I knew in my gut that this was right. This meal was about Jesus' death, but that made it a freedom meal, a celebration of grace and new life. That experience set me on my journey of discovery about the Lord's Supper. And you know what? I'm still on it!

I hope you are too. I hope the Lord's Supper is not just something you do because everybody does it. You are Levi. You are Zacchaeus. You are the prodigal son. Or maybe you are the older brother and you decided to join the party after all. Remember what Jesus said about Zacchaeus? "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." You are a son of Abraham, or a daughter of Abraham, if you have faith like Abraham's. This meal celebrates your salvation.

Jesus has set you free and given you new life, eternal life, abundant life. This meal is part of that. It is a gift he gives you. He invites you to come and share in it. He is the host. He is the guest of honor. When you eat and drink in faith, he gives himself to you

by his Holy Spirit. He is present not physically but literally and spiritually. The bread and cup are symbols, but they are not empty symbols. This meal unites you with Christ and in it you receive the benefits of his death. So this meal is a way to receive God's grace, and it is a celebration of that grace.

You ought to eat and drink with reverence, remembering Jesus' death for you. You ought also to eat and drink with joy, because Jesus is alive, and his death gives you life! Again, ask Levi if you can share a meal with Jesus without joy. Some of the Pharisees did, but they did not believe. Levi did believe. He followed Jesus, and Jesus welcomed him into God's family. Levi ate and drank with Jesus with a *joyful* heart. You should too.

In conclusion, during his ministry, Jesus' critics complained that he ate with sinners. He still does! Amen.

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