

The Table of Welcome
Luke 5:27-32
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 10, 2023
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With whom do you eat?

Most commonly I eat with those who share the same house that I do - in my case, my husband and our two children. Perhaps equally as often I eat by myself, taking bites between sentences typed at the office or consuming my food as I travel from point a to point b in my car.

But, there are many meals that include others. As I think over just the last few weeks, I have eaten with a number of different people -

- Two girlfriends, mothers of teenagers who I met through our kids' activities. We ate at a new restaurant that had recently opened.
- A couple from the church, dear people who invited me to their home where we had fruit and sweet bread, tea and coffee in their backyard around a low table.
- An older member of the church and some of her friends, people she wanted me to meet because she has invited them to church.
- Colleagues with whom I share leadership of a local organization. We worked as we ate a delicious meal at an established local restaurant.
- A number of you from the church gathered on the lawn each Monday night this past month as we shared ice cream treats and conversation.
- A friend who is grieving a recent loss, someone my heart just needed to sit with and hear how she is.
- Over 100 people who shared lunch on a recent Saturday at the Free Lunch Program, although if I'm honest I really only ate with others who had come to volunteer that day as serving was the priority while guests were eating.
- My puppy, a six-month old Lab, who has learned that he likes Life cereal and if he sits really well next to me each morning, he will be given a few pieces as I eat mine.

While that list has some diversity on it, what I realize in sharing it is how often I eat with those I am already in relationship with...how often I eat with those who are very similar to me...how often I eat with those who, like me, have more than enough...how often I eat with those with whom I already feel safe.

I suspect this is true of most of us. And, it's not that doing so is a bad thing. There is certainly a time and place for those kinds of meals.

Meanwhile, time and time again, Jesus invites us to stretch ourselves beyond our usual boundaries. Jesus invites us to sit at the table with those not like us. Jesus invites us to enter into relationships even with people from whom we have been told we should stay separated.

Today's story begins with Jesus' invitation. He sees Levi, a tax collector, working his booth and he says to him, "Follow me." Of course, just that was more than some folks could handle. After all, as a tax collector, Levi was in relationship with the Roman empire, he was supporting the very systems that were oppressing the Jewish people. And, as a tax collector, Levi had the right to take advantage of folks, to charge more than they owed, to keep the extra for himself.

For a number of reasons, Levi was not considered to be a great guy. In fact, more than that, he was considered to be a sinner. And so, common sense would say that Jesus should avoid him. But instead, he invited him.

And not only did Jesus invite Levi to follow, but then when Levi invited Jesus to his table, Jesus joined him and a house full of tax collectors and sinners, and shared a meal with them.

While others were outside the house watching as this banquet took place - a common happening in Galilean villages - Jesus was inside at the table with unexpected people. And, if we are honest, they were unexpected for a number of reasons - some we might even call good reasons.

The people at Levi's table with Jesus, we've already established, were seen as sinners. They were in cahoots with an oppressive empire under which many struggled. They took advantage of their neighbors. And, add to that, there were strict rules around the table - rules about what foods were served and how they were prepared, rules that impacted people's ability to participate in important religious rituals. It was no wonder that some around Jesus were critical.

And, friends, this wasn't just a problem of the religious leaders in Jesus' time. If we are honest, in our own lifetimes we have watched as people haven't always been welcome at the table. I mentioned last week the communion tokens in 18th century Scotland that gave those who had been approved access to the table. But we don't have to go that far back to see divisions. Even within our own denomination where we say again and again that all are welcome, where communion has been practiced each Sunday for centuries and where fencing the table with creeds and membership has been criticized, even with us over our history, not everyone has always been welcome at the table.

Just within the lifetimes of many of us worshiping today, white people and people of color didn't eat together, even at the communion table, in fact often they weren't worshiping together.

Just within our lifetimes there were rules - sometimes unspoken, but rules nonetheless - about who was welcome based on how people dressed and what jobs they had and what their reputation in the community was like.

Just within the last couple of decades we have started thinking differently about the table in connection with children and with others not yet baptized. For most of history those were people left out of the rituals of communion, left waiting for the day when their baptism or other ritual would allow them access.

And yet the fences put around the table to limit access, the circles drawn to keep people out - these aren't the stuff of Jesus, they are instead the creations of systems of power and control.

Because, when we read the Jesus stories, what we see is Jesus eating with everyone - with young and old, with insiders and outsiders, with those who were always welcome and those who would never be given a seat. What we see is Jesus reminding us that the table is meant to be a place of welcome for all, and that all really does mean all.

And, especially today, when we have for many years welcomed people who were traditionally kept away from the table, it is easy for us to forget how revolutionary this idea is. It is easy for us to forget that it matters when all are welcome...it matters when all really means all.

In fact, Dr. David Anderson Hooker, one of our preachers at this summer's General Assembly, said, "The major ministry of Jesus was what he did at the table not on the cross. He created a world where everyone was welcome with just regard. Jesus was killed precisely because this narrative at the table was in direct conflict with the empire. Jesus' ministry was lived out at the table and the empire's retribution was at the cross" (July 31, 2023 evening worship at General Assembly in Louisville, KY).

Sit with that for a moment. The impact of an open table, a table where there really is room for everyone - that impact is great. Dr. Hooker concluded his comments asking, "Do you still want a seat at this table?" (July 31, 2023 General Assembly evening worship).

This is a welcome table. There is room for you. There is room for those you love. There is room for those you are unsure about. There is room for those you don't want to be in a room with. There is room...room for everyone.

That is the table that Jesus sets before us - a table of welcome. That is the table Jesus invites us to set in the world - a table where all - all - are welcome. May it be so.