

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 9:9-13 (NRSV)

[9] 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.

[10] And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. [11] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" [12] But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Matthew 9:18-26 (NRSV)

[18] 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." [19] And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. [20] Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, [21] for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." [22] Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. [23] When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, [24] he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. [25] But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. [26] And the report of this spread throughout that district.

ALL DEBTORS RISE

A man told of going to court with his wife who is an attorney. It was bankruptcy court and when the judge entered the attendant cried out,

"All debtors rise."

At that point all those who had business with the bankruptcy court rose to their feet.

All debtors rise. There is shame in those words. Many of us hope (me included) that we never have to stand before that judgment bar. Instead, we would like to point with pride to our accomplishments and awards.

We would like to claim that we owe nothing, that we pay off our credit card each month and have money in the bank. Bankruptcy court is for someone else, for those deadbeats who don't pay their bills.

I heard about a bill that was before Congress. I'm not sure if it has passed or not, but that bill would make it harder for people to declare bankruptcy.

According to the sponsors of the bill, there were many who could pay their bills but avoided doing it by declaring bankruptcy. They were taking advantage of the legal system and avoiding responsibility for their debts.

Whether that bill becomes law or not, I think it is always hard to declare bankruptcy. It is an admission of failure. It is a public way of saying,

"I'm not a good businessman. I don't manage my money well. I'm in over my head, and my financial world is in shambles."

ALL ARE DEBTORS

We may not be in bankruptcy court when it comes to our finances.

But, according to the Bible, we all live life in the "red." We all owe. We are all indebted to a God who must do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

To put it another way, we are all sinners.

Sometimes I wonder if that phrase from bankruptcy court might be a good call to worship. Perhaps I should shout out each week, "All debtors rise."

And then all of us would stumble to our feet with downcast eyes knowing that we are part of that shameful group that owes and cannot begin to pay back what we owe.

Isn't that what we say each Sunday in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?"

Early in the worship service we all repeat a prayer of confession. We admit that we are debtors that we have sinned against God and our fellow men and women. We are without hope except for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

My biggest "beef" with the contemporary worship movement is that there doesn't seem to be a time for confession.

When you remove all the traditional creeds and prayers, the worship service has a hollow ring. It doesn't ring true because a big part, the first part of the gospel is omitted.

As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans,
"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

All debtors rise.

This call must be a part of every worship service.

The Bible tells us that this is our cue to stand along with all our neighbors.

We are united in this confession.

It is the absolute truth about each and every one of us.

A CHURCH FOR GOOD PEOPLE?

But, strangely enough, this is the confession many of us in the church do not want to make.

We have a distorted view of the faith.

We believe that church is for the "good people," those who have kept their nose clean, played by the rules and have been successful in life.

The church, according to some, is that place where we can find people who are role models, pillars of society and paragons of virtue.

This was the view of a religious group who long ago challenged Jesus. You may have heard of them.

They were called the Pharisees.

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

By and large, the Pharisees didn't have any problems with what Jesus taught. It was what he did and those with whom he associated that gave them problems.

Jesus called scoundrels and thieves to become a part of his movement. He touched people who were unclean.

And worst of all, he even ate with "sinners and tax collectors."

Even today eating a meal with someone suggests a certain closeness and acceptance. If you invite someone to eat with you, you are inviting that person into your life.

In Jesus' world, the invitation to dinner was even more important. It was almost like a sacrament. Indeed, one of our sacraments, the Lord's Supper, comes from a meal shared with friends.

The Pharisees were well aware of the importance of issuing a dinner invitation. After all, they were sort of the religious "Emily Posts" of their day. They made the rules of polite society, and one important rule was that you didn't contaminate a good meal by eating with the wrong people.

But, Jesus had broken the rule on more than one occasion. Some theologians refer to this as the "radical table fellowship" of Jesus.

TAX COLLECTORS

The charge leveled in our passage for today was often leveled against Jesus. And the charge was true. Jesus often ate with "sinners and tax collectors."

Those two words went together like bread and butter. Sinners were those who broke the law and tax collectors were those who flaunted the law.

It must have been very troubling to the Pharisees and many others that Jesus was willing to call someone like Matthew to be a part of his life.

Matthew was a tax collector, a Jewish officer of the Roman IRS. Tax collectors were turncoats who often charged extra as a way to line their own pockets. Today we might say that they gave aid and comfort to the enemy.

The religious leaders wanted to know how Jesus could call a person like Matthew. Jesus couldn't say that he didn't know what Matthew did for a living. Matthew was hard at work at his tax booth when Jesus called him to follow.

But, Jesus called Matthew. More than that, Jesus went out of his way to let the Pharisees know that it wasn't a mistake.

The Pharisees tried to sow doubt in the minds of Jesus' disciples by asking them about his radical table fellowship. They asked,

"Doesn't your Master know that birds of a feather flock together? If he's such an important person, why does he have fellowship with the low life of society?"

Jesus overheard them and shot back,

"Healthy people don't need a doctor, and I'm a doctor.

I'm a doctor for those who are sick, sin sick. I'm not here to call the righteous. I'm here to call the sinners."

THE HUNGER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

No wonder Jesus caused so much controversy. Some thought when Jesus called sinners that he was condoning the sin.

Some still think that, turning the tough love of Jesus into a mushy kind of acceptance that requires no change on the part of the sinner. As someone once put it, "God will forgive me. He's in the forgiving business."

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Jesus called Matthew, a sinner and a tax collector. But, the call of Jesus required Matthew to get up from his tax table and follow Jesus. To put it another way, the call of Jesus was the call to go in a different direction.

Earlier in the gospel of Matthew we find the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon begins with blessings, the blessings we sometimes call the Beatitudes. And one of the Beatitudes goes

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled."

Why did Matthew get up from his tax collector's table, leave his only means of support and follow Jesus? I think it was because he had a hunger and a thirst for righteousness.

Matthew didn't like what he had become, and he was looking for someone who would lead him in a different direction. Jesus did just that.

In an act of mercy Jesus gave this debtor a new lease on life. It was as if Jesus said,
"All debtors rise,"

And Matthew stood up and went in a new direction.

AN INVITATION TO DINNER

It is an act of mercy to call someone to go in a different direction. And how do you do that? According to our passage for today you do that by inviting someone to dinner.

This past week I was reminded of that fact. About lunch time a young couple rang the doorbell to the church office. I was hungry. I had a million things to do. I didn't want to talk to them.

But, it was raining, and those kids didn't look much older than my own daughter. So I went to the door and invited them in. They wanted to talk with me.

Unfortunately, nine out of ten times when a person comes to the door of the church and wants to talk with me they are some sort of con artist. Over the years I have become a deeply suspicious person for good reason.

Tax collectors and sinners know how to use the system!

But, that morning I had been studying this story about Jesus and how he invited all the wrong people to have dinner with him so I decided to eat with this couple.

(Actually, I decided to have a Coke with them in the fellowship hall!)

He helped me set up one of the round plastic tables, and we pulled up a few chairs.

The dynamics of the relationship began to change. I once again thought about this passage, about how we are all debtors when it comes to God's kingdom. All of a sudden I felt a real kinship with the young couple.

I was no longer the authority figure reluctantly giving out help. I was a friend, a fellow stranger on this journey we call life.

They told me that they needed a place to stay. They had dreams of finding a job in the area, and they had a baby in New York who would join them once they were able to get things worked out.

I worried about what might happen to them. More than one dreamer has come our way only to be disappointed. They left to get some clothes at the Christian Ministry Center, and I left for lunch and my afternoon appointments.

The next day the young couple appeared at the door to the church. They just stopped by to say thank you for my help. They were able to get some decent clothes and had some leads on jobs. It was the first time I had seen them smile.

I hadn't been able to do anything for them except point them in the right direction and share a cold Coke around a table. But, maybe that was what they needed most. And maybe that's what all of us need most.

THE TABLE

Table fellowship with fellow sinners brings us closer to Christ than any other experience. Eating and drinking can be a sacrament, a way of remembering that God in Christ can change what we cannot change. God in Christ can heal us, all of us.

Recently I heard about a program started by a Reformed Church in a very small town in North Dakota. The program was called "The Table."

The pastor said that he thought of it as a feeding program for the poor, but the woman in his church who was heading up the program said that it would be much more. It would be something that would transform everyone in their community.

This program would be different from our feeding program where we serve and those in need receive. This would be a common meal. Everyone would share in all aspects of this meal. It would be prepared together and eaten together.

The pastor said that it worked. He said that a visitor to this meal could not have distinguished between church members and those who came because they didn't have anything to eat.

In fact, as time passed, the hungry ones began to feed their hosts. They knew from hard experience what it was to lose someone or be ill, and they began to listen compassionately as some church members began to tentatively share their hopes and fears with the group.

Others in the community began to hear about what was happening and more and more began to come.

It really did change the whole community.

Some of the hungry people who frequented the meal began to come to church services as well. Apparently, they began to feel a need for something more than food.

I wonder if that's how it worked long ago when Jesus called Matthew and other sinners to have a meal with him.

I can imagine Matthew's house being filled with hungry people, people who were hungry not only for food but also for mercy.

And on that day long ago they found in Jesus food for their body and food for their soul.

THE WHEEL

There was a woman who had a vision of God.

And in her vision there was something that looked like a giant wheel with many spokes. The many spokes represented the many different people of the world and the center of the wheel represented God.

She said that we begin at the rim of the wheel, far from God and far from most people. But, as God draws us in toward the center, as God draws us closer to Himself, we are also drawn closer to each other as well.

The spokes on the wheel come closer together at the center of the wheel, and the closer we get to God the closer we come to other people.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND COMMUNION

I guess that's why there's a meal at the center of our faith, a meal we call the Lord's Supper and a meal we also call Communion.

It is the Lord's Supper because it is in this meal that we are reminded of the real presence of Christ in our life. There is forgiveness for our sin in that body broken and blood shed. There is grace for the sinner. Debts are forgiven.

But, in the Lord's Supper, we also find a Holy Communion. We find a community of fellow sinners and fellow saints.

We are sinners because we are a community of people who have some very obvious and serious character flaws. We are a community of people with a spiritual debt that is beyond our ability to repay.

But, we are also saints because they have been called just like Matthew was called long ago. We have been touched just like the sick woman and the dead child were touched long ago.

We are a very diverse and divided people, but we have one thing in common.

Jesus has called us to come to His banquet. And the closer we come to Jesus, the closer we come to each other.

So, fellow sinners and saints, I invite you to partake once again in this meal together.

It is not just a bit of bread and a sip of juice. It is a sign and seal of a greater kingdom that comes.

When that kingdom comes people will arrive from the North and the South, the East and West ... from all over the world they will come to eat at God's table, and the whole world will be changed by that meal.

All debtors rise as we say what we believe and celebrate the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

[Let us stand as we say what we believe using the Creed that is printed in your bulletin.]

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN