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“Why Do You Eat and Drink with Tax Collectors and Sinners?”

A sermon by Douglas F. Ottati

Third Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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Isaiah 25:6–10; Luke 5:27–39

Our primary passage for this morning, Luke 5:27–39, has a parallel in Mark 2:13–17, and then also in Matthew 9:9–13, where the disciple is called Matthew rather than Levi. But our first order of business should be to establish the fact that the passage involves a celebratory dinner, and that in the Bible, eating and drinking together, a special dinner, a banquet, or a feast is a symbol of salvation.

Consider our passage from Isaiah. Here, we find a vision of a banquet on the mountain. The LORD of hosts, for whom we have waited, saves by making for all peoples a feast of rich food and well-aged wines, by swallowing death forever, and by wiping tears from all eyes. Or again, in Luke 14, Jesus presents as a symbol of the kingdom a householder who first invites people to a banquet and then compels the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame to attend.

Thanksgiving is pretty much my favorite holiday because it is built around nothing more or less than a meal together. But I didn't always think about it this way. When I was young, I was sometimes bored by it. What could I or anyone else possibly do while we were stuck with Uncle Bill for an entire afternoon? What's the point? You hang around with him for what seems an eternity, you have a big meal, and THEN WHAT?

But in fact eating and drinking together commemorates and celebrates. It embodies and enacts. How so? What makes eating and drinking together symbolically articulate and expressive?

Well, for one thing, a meal is literally and physically nourishing. It's a biological necessity. Without eating and drinking, people do not live. Having a meal means LIFE.

It is, of course, also *socially* nourishing. People live by bread, but they don't live by bread alone. They are ineluctably social creatures who also live by good company, social relationships, and interactions. To eat and drink together is to be nourished as a community. The people with whom we eat and drink become our companions, our community, and (as we would have said in New Jersey) *our people*. Eating and drinking with one another binds us together in a common life.

But that's not all. Eating and drinking also *celebrates*. We know that people threw dinner parties in ancient cultures much as they do in our own. When we eat and drink together, we don't just sit there, chew, and digest. It's an occasion. We celebrate life together (rather than a solitary life apart). We enjoy the gift of life together, we laugh, we converse, and we have a good time.

Indeed, just because of their physical, social, and celebrative aspects, common meals also have a deeper *spiritual* resonance. Think of a Seder and the table liturgy that rehearses Israel's exodus from Egypt. And again, in the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, we are invited to eat, drink, and celebrate together at the Lord's Table. We are invited into true communion with God in community with one another.

Now consider Luke 5:27–32 in some detail. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow him, and Levi does. Tax collectors are reviled in Jesus' time and place because they collect taxes for a government in league with an occupying power. Their practices and relationships with other peoples or "the Gentiles" (such as the Romans) render them ritually impure. What's more, many of them are also dishonest. Hence the phrase "tax collectors and sinners."

So here in Luke, Jesus calls a passingly traitorous, untrustworthy, and ritually unclean tax collector to be a disciple. Levi the tax collector then throws a party in Jesus' honor with a large crowd of undesirables. That is, Levi welcomes and accepts Jesus and his disciples into his home. He accepts them as a "his people." But, of course, it is also true that, by accepting Levi's invitation to eat and drink together, Jesus and his disciples also *welcome* and *accept* Levi and his acquaintances as their own companions.

In any case, Jesus and his disciples attend the party. They *recline* at table together, as those with some wealth do, and they enjoy a sumptuous banquet financed by questionable means. It is at this point that the Pharisees complain to Jesus' disciples. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers that he does so *on purpose*—because he has come to help those who need help, and to call them to repentance.

The passage in Luke (and also in Matthew but not in Mark) then continues with the Pharisees noting that John the Baptist's disciples don't behave this way. Instead, John's disciples frequently fast and pray, just like the Pharisees' own disciples do. So, what's up with *your* disciples? Why do they behave so poorly? Jesus says a number of things in response, ending with the claim that those who have drunk the old wine never really like the new wine. They just go around saying that the old stuff was better. That is, the Pharisees and John are out of date. They don't really know what time it is, and they don't really know what is now required.

The dinner party at Levi's house is *not* a one off event. In the gospels, Jesus and his disciples frequently eat and drink with the "wrong people," and the Pharisees and others frequently complain. Jesus also regularly defends the practice. Thus, in Luke 15:2, the Pharisees complain, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." And then Jesus proceeds to tell three parables—one of them the so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son—in defense of the practice.

And, that is just what we have here—a regular practice—an intentional style of mission and ministry. Jesus eats and drinks with all the wrong people *on purpose*. He welcomes everyone into a community of acceptance, nourishment, celebration, life, and care. He welcomes all into a new communion with God in community

with others. Jesus accepts everyone—the poor, the morally questionable, the centurion of an occupying army, women, the lame, the sick, the despised Samaritan, and the Gentile—into God’s kingdom and its well being or *shalom*.

This is one way that Jesus enacts and performs the gospel, or the good news of God’s kingdom. This is one way that he not only speaks his message but also acts it out. *The kingdom is good news for all, and a common meal or banquet open to all is one way to portray and enact this good news.*

Why do we *not* call the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples the night before he is executed the Only Supper? Answer: because it continues this same practice of eating and drinking together. Moreover, if the Last Supper is the prototypical Eucharist—and it is—then the party at Levi’s house is also Eucharistic. A primary point of the Lord’s Supper is to eat and drink with all the wrong people, and thus *to welcome all into God’s reconciled and beloved community.*

I can still hear my younger self wondering and complaining. “Okay, so there’s a common meal, THEN WHAT?” But in fact, welcoming all and participating in a common meal IS the thing. It’s physical, social, and spiritual nourishment. It’s the beginning and reaffirmation of a new life together and a new community. If I could speak to my younger and former self, I’d like to tell him to lighten up, become a little less prototypically Presbyterian, and perhaps a bit more Italian. I’d like to tell him that a part of the point of a Thanksgiving meal IS that you eat and drink together and, by the way, put up with Uncle Bill for the entire afternoon. The celebration (the meal, the wine, the talk, and the laughter) IS the point. And it’s good practice, too. Just imagine how many people *not* of your own choosing you may have to put up with when, at the last, they “come from east and west, from north and south, and . . . eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:19).

Welcoming all into God’s reconciled and beloved community, celebrating, accepting, and enjoying life together. For the church, this really is a first and essential step toward becoming a faithful and moral, rather than an exclusive and self-righteous, community. But issuing the invitation does not always come easily.

From time to time, the churches themselves devise exclusionary practices. They even manage to turn the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist into an exclusionary practice. For example,

- Years ago, Presbyterians used to “fence” the table and sometimes even dispensed tokens for admission to the Supper in order to ensure that only the morally worthy might participate.
- A few months ago, Pope Francis failed to convince a conclave of Roman Catholic bishops to stop (officially) barring divorced people from communion.
- And, of course, we know that a number of churches have had and still have difficulty welcoming LGBT people.

It's almost as if the churches sometimes find Jesus own practice and his consistent defense of it insufficient. Why does *this fellow* eat with sinners? Why should *you* eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

Answer: because this is the true if also somewhat strange discipline of grace, namely, to welcome everyone as you yourself have been welcomed and to exclude no one. Admittedly, it is not the way of an alienated and divided world. But if and when the church begins to do this, then, however fragmentarily and imperfectly, it bears the gospel of grace and it witnesses to the kingdom of God. Amen.

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