



Roanoke, Virginia

July 5, 2020

“Eating With Jesus”

Luke 5:27-32

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Beginning today, and on every Sunday of July, we are going to post a talk by Rev. Jenny McDevitt. In each one, she is going to reflect on a table story in the Bible. She’s whetted my appetite, so I invited myself to the first meal mentioned in Luke’s Gospel.

²⁷ After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” ²⁸ And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

²⁹ Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰ The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹ Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

My daughter, Virginia, enjoys cooking shows. Obviously, she is not alone because there are so many of them; *Crazy Delicious, Iron Chef, Top Chef, Chopped, Chopped Jr., The Great British Baking Show, Hell’s Kitchen...*

I don’t watch those shows, but I enjoy restaurant tours. On a weekend in New Orleans many years ago, Millie and I fit in
Breakfast at Brennan’s,
Lunch at Commander’s Palace,
Beignets from Café Du Monde,



and two dinners in restaurants in the French Quarter
with names I don't remember.

My preacher buddies and I go to Richmond every year to continue our education of
theology and the wonderful restaurants of that city.

I have continued at 21-year local tour of the many good places to eat in this valley, (though
lately I would describe the tour as takeout excursions).

Carlos,
River and Rail,
Wildflower,
Alexander's,
Rockfish Grill,
Blue Apron
Local Roots...

Restaurants are one of the glories of Roanoke, so I support them as much as I can.

For those of us who love a good meal, whether dining in or dining out—for those of us who
eat not only to live but also for those reasons we live to eat—

to savor the setting,
the flavors,
the company and conversation of others—

we have in the author of Luke's Gospel a kindred spirit.

The passage I read is the first of *eleven* stories of Jesus having a meal with others. Eleven.
And in addition to those meal stories, Luke reports Jesus doing what I love to do with Frank
Pruette, Jen Brothers, both Links, and Joe Miller... and that is talk about food.

- “**We do not live by bread alone,**” Jesus says.
- When asked why his disciples are not fasting, he says something to the effect of, “**Why would you pass up an opportunity to have a meal with someone who can change your life?**”
- He talks about crumbs falling from the table,
 - a feast being thrown for the Prodigal Son,
 - and starving Lazarus wishing he could have just a little taste of a dish from the sumptuous table of the rich man.

If Luke's Gospel were made into a mini-series, it could be shown on the Cooking Channel.

Of course, when you look at all these passages together, you notice what is true about any
wonderful meal with others. Food is only part of it. In fact, if someone were to adapt Luke's
Gospel for the Cooking Channel, creative license would be needed to add conversation about the
food served and how it was prepared because Luke never mentions the cuisine unless it is fish or
bread. Luke is more interested in the company and conversation.



What does hit you immediately when you look at all these passages together is that Jesus is not the least bit interested in *social distancing* when it comes to passing the plate or pouring the wine. I'm a big fan of social distancing right now for reasons of physical health. But with these passages, it is social distancing for moral health that is the issue. Some Pharisees and other religious leaders make the perfectly understandable point that you need to be careful about the company you keep. I said that to my daughters when they were growing up. "Don't join a herd on a stampede toward destruction," was the kind of thing I'd say to them.

Still, these leaders probably know that Jesus, as a rabbi who has come to teach, isn't going to become a tax collector just because he breaks bread with them. Their objection is more about reputation. Even in these days before photographs and videos, word spread fast about those with whom you have been seen.

But Jesus isn't worried much about his reputation, I guess. He refuses to distance himself from those the moral elite wouldn't have in their homes for reasons that are understandable and reasons that are just biased. He ignores the "Ignore List" and passes a plate to Gentiles, prostitutes, Roman collaborators, the sick, the poor...

The theme about "whose company you keep" is set here at the very first meal in Luke's Gospel. Levi is a tax collector... one of those Roman collaborators. These tax collectors are not salaried government employees. These are collection agents who work for Rome and too frequently collect more than required so as to pad their own pockets. There's a reason Levi can afford this banquet.

And it should come as no surprise that when Levi throws a banquet for Jesus, his friends make up his guest list, and that means other tax collectors, and those who would hang with tax collectors, those who are themselves shunned by respectable folks, those whose reputations are such that they are simply referred to as "sinners."

So, a good sermon on this passage would be one about grace and tolerance, about finding ways to make room in your church, your life, your neighborhood—your family—those who most need God's grace... or at least are *perceived* to be most in need of God's grace.

Yet, that is not really the point I want to make this morning. I want us to consider this story in light of this being the first of eleven stories about Jesus having a meal with others. Today, let's notice not just the surprising names on the guest lists. Notice *all* the names.

In fact, let's look again at this meal in Levi's home because I want to question some assumptions I made—that a lot of people make—about this meal. Was it fair of me to look at Levi simply as a man of questionable character? Yes, as a tax collector of his day, he probably built his wealth in part through extortion. But, let's remember why he is throwing this banquet. He's a disciple now. Jesus called him to follow and Levi left everything to follow Jesus.

And there's another assumption about Jesus. Some think that his leaving "everything" means leaving his money behind. No, he left his life behind. He hasn't abandoned his tax collector friends, but he's not living that life anymore. He's on a new path following Jesus so good news can spread in the world.



And let's notice why he is throwing the banquet. He isn't throwing a party for his friends but a banquet for Jesus, and he invites his friends to attend. He wants them to meet Jesus. He is introducing his friends to the one who has made such a transformative difference in his life. Yeah, as a father, I didn't want my daughters to be led to bad decisions (or them lead others to bad decisions). But if anyone is going to be influenced by the company they keep, it will be, Levi hopes, his friends in getting to know Jesus. This meal may not be a picture, you see, of Jesus hanging out at a bar or brothel. This just might be a picture that could be taken at one of the house churches of Luke's community; where meals are shared, where sins are confessed, and where grace is celebrated.

Now, if you go on to take a quick look at the guest lists of the other meals Jesus has in Luke to see about the company he keeps, you'll find that he's *just not that picky*. He'll eat with just about anyone.

- Yes, he'll eat with publicly shamed sinners, but also with respectable pillars of the community like Pharisees and teachers of the Law.
- He'll eat with those who are sick, but also those who are well.
- He'll have dinner with people of another race and religion—Gentiles—but also with fellow Jews.
- He'll share a meal with 5,000 on one particularly remarkable day, but also dine privately such as with the disciples in an upper room.

You get the sense that Jesus is at home at a Family Night supper at church and at a meal at the Rescue Mission, at a meal thrown for a visiting Rabbi and for a meal with two men he meets up with walking on a road. He'll respond to a spur of the moment invitation by Zacchaeus and make elaborate plans for a Passover meal with only his closest friends. He is certainly willing to come to your house and mine for a meal if we invite him... and truth be told is already there even uninvited hearing the things we say to each other, knowing already what it is that we truly think and are passionate about.

Which is comforting... and unnerving. For if you look at these meal passages, you find that along with the theme of the company Jesus keeps there is a theme of the conversations he has. Jesus doesn't follow the rule about avoiding certain topics at the dinner table beginning with faith and politics. That's not part of his Middle Eastern upbringing, his Jewish faith, or his habits as a rabbi. He stirs things up. He challenges, he questions, he disagrees.

Again, that theme is set with this very first meal passage in Luke. I imagine that this is an open-air banquet because folks insert themselves into the conversation who are not eating the meal. Pharisees and their scribes, perhaps coming by to check things out with this new rabbi, see who is there and ask his disciples why Jesus is having dinner with tax collectors and sinners. Voices carry perhaps... or maybe they intentionally speak loud enough to be heard, but Jesus hears their question and gives an answer. Maybe he shouts over the heads of those around him, but I would like to think he gets up and goes over to this gathering of "Religious Respectables" so as to answer



them without hurting the feelings of others. “Those who are well don’t need me. I am here for the sick, that they might become well.”

Before we feel safe because at least we are not the Pharisees and their scribes (and I can assure you that parts of us are like those Pharisees and scribes, and it is not all bad), let me assure you that if you look at the other Table conversations you’ll realize that Jesus will challenge anyone—not just those who oppose him, but also those who follow him; not just the guests at meals, but also the hosts.

Just know, though, two things: first, Jesus does so out of love and, second, he is never the one to leave the table. He is never the one to refuse to break bread with another. He has meals with those who listen and those who don’t; those who adore him and those who plot to kill him; those whose lives are changed by him and one who leaves the table to betray him.

That is why I said he probably already is at your dinner table and mine, even when we didn’t think to invite him and then foolishly thought he wouldn’t show up anyway. Luke’s Gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples, shocking them. He wasn’t invited. Who would invite a dead man to their home? They think he is dead and gone, but he shows himself as alive and present, and then he shows them the wounds on this hands and side. Every reason we might have to reject others can be summarized by those wounds: gossip, betrayal, lies, humiliation, social and political attack, violence, abuse... all there, and yet, as the disciples see, Jesus is still here.

This Fourth of July weekend is one in which we celebrate political liberties. But here in this sanctuary, let’s celebrate the moral liberty that Jesus has, and that is to love even when others do their very best to give him reasons not to. We are going to come to a table where Jesus is host, and we are going to be invited to be liberated with Jesus. For he takes bread and breaks it and he shares it with the likes of them... and the likes of us... with us all... at our worst and at our best. And maybe we can hang in there with each other at this meal and possibly stop talking so much so that Jesus can get a word in edgewise... a word that might challenge us, push us, affirm us, question us, and change us. Knowing he does so out of love might give us the courage to drop our guard, our assumption, our memorized defenses of what we think we already know, and be changed by words of grace and healing, just as Levi was.

