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“A Place at the Table”

Luke 5:27-32; 17:7-10

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Luke 5:27-32

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.’*

Luke 17:7-10

⁷ “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? ⁸ Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

The year was 1573. Paolo Veronese, the great young Venetian painter, was commissioned to paint the Last Supper for the Dominican Friary in Venice. The Dominicans needed a replacement



for Titian’s version—another great young Venetian painter—that had been destroyed in a fire, and besides, they couldn’t let the Benedictines one-up them. Ten years earlier Veronese had given the Benedictines the “Wedding at Cana,” a sprawling canvas, so the Dominicans wanted their own masterpiece.

What they were probably expecting was something like this:



Something like Da Vinci’s “Last Supper” – reverent and tidy. Of course, Da Vinci’s was painted on the wall of a refectory in a convent in Milan a century earlier. Do you think those nuns in Milan had any idea they were dining in the shadow of a masterpiece? That’s the kind of thing the Dominicans wanted. Dignified, orderly, solemn.

But what they got instead was something altogether different. What the Dominicans got was this:



It was bigger than life! Veronese gave them a chaotic and dazzling painting almost 18 feet high, 43 feet wide. Imagine eating breakfast next to that every morning. It is stunning, isn't it!? Well, not everyone thought so. The Dominicans were offended. And unfortunately, The Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition in Venice felt the same. They summoned Veronese to trial on charges of irreverence, indecorum, possibly even heresy—a charge that carried the death penalty.

What was the problem? Veronese let his imagination run wild with the guest list for the Last Supper. At first glance it looks like a Renaissance banquet—Jesus seated in the middle, halo faintly glowing, flanked by Peter and John. Judas the uneasy figure sitting in red. Judas the uneasy figure sitting in red.



But then your eyes drift.

Down at Jesus' feet, a dog stares at a cat gnawing on a bone. Not exactly kosher for the institution of the Lord's Supper. The Tribunal suggested Veronese replace the dog with Mary Magdalene—revealing more about their views of Mary than it does about Veronese's brush—but Veronese refused.¹

¹ For more on the trial, see the transcript here: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/high-renaissance-rome/late-renaissance-venice/a/transcript-of-the-trial-of-veronese>



Scan to the far right and you see soldiers in black, visibly tipsy.



By their dress they were recognizable as Germans, which to a 16th-century Venetian Catholic meant Lutherans. Protestants. You know, enemies of the faith. And here they were, raising glasses at the Last Supper in a Dominican friary! No wonder the church was offended.

On the left, a little person, dressed as a jester with a parrot on his arm entertains the crowd.



A child, likely of African descent, reaches toward the bird.



Venice, after all, was a port city alive with diversity. And just above them, through the pillars, one of the disciples casually picks his teeth with a fork. Hardly the image of reverence the friars had in mind. Or could he be in deep contemplation as he gazes toward the center at Jesus or possibly at Judas.

When questioned by the Inquisition, Veronese was asked, “Do you think it is appropriate that the Last Supper of Our Lord includes jesters, drunks, Germans, dwarves, and the like?” Veronese replied, “No, your honor.” The inquisitor pressed on, “Do you not know Germany is infested with heresy, that they fill their paintings with sacrilegious images that spread evil to the ignorant?” Veronese, calm and collected, said, “That would indeed be evil. But I had a lot of wall to cover.” His defense was as simple as his brushstrokes: he filled the canvas with humanity. Messy, flawed, foolish, diverse.

Veronese wasn’t the first one to make people uncomfortable with his dinner parties. Jesus did it long before him. Luke reminds us that dinner tables in the ancient world were places of privilege and were full of hierarchy. You have the host, you have the servant, and you have the guest. Everyone had a role, a part to play, expectations to uphold. Let’s explore each role.

The host is in control. They decide who is invited, what is served, and how the table is set. Hosts even decide where everyone is seated... if you have ever been to a plated dinner, you know what I mean. Someone’s importance and relationship to the host is evident based on where they sit. There is power in being the host. And many of us know what it feels like to be a host, whether in our homes, at our workplaces, or even here at church.

But we must be careful because when we are the host, we are tempted to gatekeep, to guard the table. To decide who belongs. To draw boundaries.

When Jesus asks, “*Who among you would say to your servant, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’*”—he is inviting the disciples to first identify with the host. And every one of them would have nodded along. Of course the servant doesn’t get to sit. Of course the master expects service. That’s how the world works. We might even nod along too.

But then Jesus pivots just 3 verses later. Suddenly the disciples are no longer the master. No longer are they to identify with the host. *So you also, after you finished your orders, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have only done what we ought to have done.’* They are now the servants. The ones who do the work, who serve the meal, who should expect nothing in return. The ones who see the table but never quite belong at it.

This is not Jesus celebrating exploitation or calling his disciples to be submissive to the powers that be. This is Jesus revealing how deeply embedded hierarchy, exclusion, and power are in our human systems. And this is Jesus asking his disciples to flip the script. It is Jesus calling his



followers to humility. To servanthood. To a life that is not lived for reward but for love. What Jesus is saying here is, *Do what you were called to do—not for applause, not for recognition, not for prosperity—but because it is what love requires.*

First the disciples are to identify with the host, then the servant. Because Jesus refuses to let us stay where we're comfortable.

But what if we imagine ourselves as guests in this story. What role do guests have? What expectations are placed on the guest?

Well for starters, there is an expectation to RSVP if requested... and do it in a timely manner. I will go ahead and apologize for my generation's lack of this understanding. ... As a guest, I always wonder when is it appropriate to bring a gift? Should I bring a bottle of wine to a dinner party, or is that considered rude and intruding on the host's planned pairings? And what about dress code... what does "dressy casual" really mean? It would mean something totally different for a CEO and, let's say, a youth pastor, especially if the event starts after 6 PM... then the dress code expectations change again. And speaking of time, it seems there are times it is expected to arrive 15 minutes early and then there are other when it's appropriate to show up 15 minutes late ... offering the host what is known as a "grace period."

Being a guest can be confusing. And sometimes it can be overwhelming. And all the while guests are invited, but their place is rather fragile.

There is a fear that their welcome could be withdrawn or a fear they would feel left out even when invited. Many in our world know that fear, maybe you have even felt that before—walking into a space and wondering if you truly belong. You go to find your place at the table and see that it is off to the side, not anywhere close to front and center. Which then makes you wonder about your relationships with those around you. You are standing in a crowded room as an invited guest yet feel unseen or unwelcomed. If you have ever felt that way, hear this: Jesus knows this experience as well. He was a guest at many tables where his presence was questioned, his welcome uncertain, his reputation criticized. He knew too well the vulnerability of being a guest, and Jesus took that on so others might know they were safe.

Hosts guard and control. Guests worry and wonder. Servants labor without thanks.

This parable cracks open all three roles and asks us to see how we inhabit each one, how we play into the expectations, both good and bad, and how we might learn from our experience as each.

And still Jesus unsettles them all.

Time and time again, Jesus was the guest at someone's table. Jesus shared meals with the people the righteous of his day found unsavory. Time and time again, the religious leaders



complain, “Why do you eat with them?” “I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Time and time again, Jesus shows us that through love, because of love, roles and expectations must shift in the kingdom of God: the host lays aside privilege, the guest is honored and secure, and the servant is lifted up as friend and is asked to sit.

So, what happened to Veronese? The Tribunal did not have him executed. Instead, they ordered him to fix the painting within 90 days, at his own expense. And he did—though not in the way they expected. He didn’t turn the dog into Mary Magdalene. He didn’t make the Lutherans into pious musicians. He didn’t swap the jester for an angel. He did something quite clever and far more subversive. He simply changed the title. No longer was it *The Last Supper*. He renamed it *The Feast in the House of Levi*.

What Veronese captured with paint, Jesus lived with bread and wine. He invited the “wrong” people. He broke cultural boundaries. He let the guest list get messy. He brought about a new concept of righteousness, one defined by relationship. With Jesus the table widens, boundaries break, expectations shatter. And when the leaders cried irreverence, he simply kept breaking bread, pouring wine, serving love.

“Why do you eat with them?” “Because these are the ones I love.”

So, who is at our table?

Maybe we should imagine our own Veronese painting—our modern American version: at the table sits a migrant worker in a faded shirt, an unhoused veteran clutching a backpack, a teenager scrolling on their phone and another one rolling their eyes. A politician is seated right beside a protester with a sign, a police officer still in uniform. In the corner a drag performer with glitter still in their hair, and a banker in a pressed suit with *The Wall Street Journal* folded under his arm. Seated on the left there is a mother on food stamps trying to soothe a crying baby, a refugee family still learning English. And to the right, a climate activist holding her reusable water bottle, a coal miner with dust on their face and a farmworker with dark, sun-soaked skin. Dogs lie under the table; cats lie on the table—because that’s just what cats do. There’s a kid who spills juice and another one who colors on the white tablecloth with marker, and, yes, it’s a permanent marker. Someone is laughing too loudly, someone else looks uncomfortable. It is loud and messy, familiar and foreign, colorful, offensive and beautiful all at once.

And Christ is at the center. Breaking bread. Pouring wine. Feeding them all.

Christ is at the center. Feeding us all.

Because Christ is the one who takes the table we want to keep clean and respectable, and fills it with jesters and drunks, foreigners and fools, tax collectors and sinners, even those who betray us like Judas. Christ is the one who tells us we are not masters at the table, but servants. Christ is the



one who calls us, on this World Communion Sunday, to set a table wide enough for the whole messy, beautiful, broken world. And then invites us all to sit... Because Christ is the host and Christ is at the center.

May it be so. Amen.

