



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

SCRIPTURE:  
Mark 2: 13-17,  
21-22

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February 6, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**W**hen Jesus began his ministry, he called disciples. You remember, he called James, John, Andrew and Simon, whose name was changed to Peter. They dropped everything and followed him. We talked about that story a couple weeks ago.

But Jesus was not finished calling disciples. He sees Levi at the tax booth. This is the first we have heard of Levi, son of Alphaeus. But we have heard of tax collectors before, so we know a bit about him. Tax collectors were agents of the occupying Roman rule. They were seen as unclean and even immoral. They were people of power and it is not uncommon for people of power to use their power for their personal benefit—sometimes at the expense of others. That's true today. It was true then as well. We always have to be aware of the power we wield. Some have enough power that they can take unfair advantage of others. In Jesus' time, tax collectors would fall in that category. They had the freedom to determine how much tax you paid and they were known for overcharging and pocketing the extra. So, many tax collectors were not good people. We don't know Levi, but there is reason to view him with suspicion. He was probably not a good guy.

But Jesus says to Levi: I want you to follow me. To use the language of his later metaphor, Jesus was bursting some wineskins. I love that image. It teaches that the ways of Jesus don't fit in any culture, then or now, without reordering things, realigning things, sometimes turning things upside down. He's bursting wineskins because he is redefining what it is to be righteous—what it is to be good. We all want to be good. Jesus wants to show us how.

Jesus broke open some wineskins when he tells Levi: Come with us, for you belong with us. Now we

don't know Levi specifically. Maybe he was a good guy; maybe he wasn't. The ambiguity is the point. Jesus is redefining righteousness for his followers. It's not about being pure and fencing yourself off from all impure folks; it's about relationships.

That's why Jesus not only calls Levi, but he eats with him. The text says they go to Levi's house, but that's an interpretation. The Greek just reads they went to 'his' house. So, we don't know if it is Levi's house or Jesus' house. We don't know who is the host and who is the guest and I wonder if that's the point. This isn't about hosting because that can be a status thing. But Jesus is challenging the ways of status. Wherever it happens, they are eating together and that's not supposed to happen.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves: Why would people care so much who Jesus eats with? Why should they care?

I want to suggest two things that we take away from this passage. When Jesus eats with Levi, he makes it clear that the bad folks are not completely bad *and* the good folks are not completely good.

When I was a kid, my neighbor was Danny Martin. He was a year or so older than me and we were buds. Our backyards met at the chain-link fence. There was a tree in his yard that grew into our yard and in that tree, over the chain-link fence, there was a treehouse. At the entrance to the treehouse, there was a sign that communicated the rule for the treehouse: No Girls Allowed.

We both had sisters. I had one; he had two. We considered girls, in general, and sisters, in particular, to be a creation flaw. No girls allowed.

Then Helen Walters moved in down the street. One afternoon, she stopped her bike in Danny's driveway and said, "Cool treehouse. Could I see it?" As I started to cite the rule, Danny said, "Sure."

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When I asked him, “Why did you let her into the treehouse?” he said, “I don’t know.” Life is simpler when we know who is in and who is out. But he broke the code—burst my wineskins, it did.

They didn’t think Jesus should eat with Levi because Levi was not a good man. You are supposed to be civil to him. Be polite. That’s how civilized people treat lesser people. It provides a chance to show our civility. But civility should not be confused with equality; we don’t belong together.

Jesus eating with Levi complicates how they see Levi, but first it complicates how they see themselves. To say it again, Levi was not as completely evil as they assumed and they were not as good as they believed.

My son is going to school and he is studying science: chemistry, microbiology, anatomy and a list of other classes that would have me running to the registrar’s office to drop them and sign up for a class with a metaphor. Last week I asked him about what he’s studying and he said, “Well, today we talked about the ribosomal role in cellular protein synthesis.” And he talked about it for the next five minutes. I listened but I didn’t understand anything after he said, “Today we talked about...”

It reminds me how exciting and how stressful it is to be in school. It’s exciting because you are learning. It’s stressful because you are learning... stretching your mind and your world view. It’s intense.

The next day I read about the apparent organized attack on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—bomb threats made against 14 of them. Most of these colleges and universities were created after the civil war when many colleges and universities refused to educate people of color.

Most of these HBCUs have, throughout their history, endured threats and violence. Of course, other institutions have had bomb threats as well. There are hundreds every year. But the FBI said that these threats that happened on the first day of Black History Month appear to be racially motivated. In other words, not just an occurrence, but part of a pattern.

Wayne Frederick is president of Howard University and he said, “It takes courage to do what we do when

we know some people don’t want us here.” He says their work is important because the nation needs more people of color as politicians and doctors and judges and business owners. He sounds proud when he states that over the past couple decades, Howard has sent more African Americans into STEM Ph.D. programs than “Stanford, Harvard, MIT and Yale combined.”<sup>1</sup>

I thought about my conversation with my kid. These are college students who should be encouraged to study, should be encouraged to succeed, but once again someone doesn’t want them to succeed. They don’t belong. They go to class under the cloud of potential violence. So, I’m praying for the students of our nation, children of other parents, who don’t feel safe.

I know there are some who say we need to stop talking about race. Just pretend that racism isn’t a thing, or pretend that racism is something we have grown out of because we don’t practice it the same ways we did 30 years ago, or 50 years ago, or 100 years ago, or 200 years ago. If we don’t talk about it and make sure our children don’t have to learn about it, it will go away.

But that’s not true. We don’t grow by ignoring the truth. We don’t find the good by pretending the bad isn’t there. And we don’t grow by refusing to allow our neighbor to tell their own story, but rather insisting that we must control the narrative.

No, every follower of Jesus knows that no matter how much progress we have made, we are not home yet. We have not reached God’s promised day and we have some growing to do. I’m not casting stones at anyone.

I am saying that as people of faith, we should be the hungriest for change, the ones most desiring progress, the ones who are quickest to admit that until God’s promised day arrives, we need to do better. And I think we can get better. But to do so may require our wineskins to be burst a bit. It may require that we be open to the idea that we are not as righteous as we thought, that the ways of God may not fit neatly or easily into our current culture but newness is possible.

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1 All the information on HBCUs and quotes from President Frederick are cited from Adam Harris, “Attending an HBCU Has Always Been an Act of Courage” at [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com).

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Jesus bursts their wineskins because he showed them that they needed a self-awareness; that righteousness is never something we have, it is always something we pursue. But he also shocked them by how he welcomed the folks that everyone agreed were not good people.

I was in high school when my father led a group to tour Israel. The tour guide was a Christian named Mustafa. He was funny and we hit it off. He lived in Bethlehem and wanted us to have lunch at a particular café in Bethlehem where his mother was a cook. When we arrived, I saw something I had never seen before. Not in person. There was a man with a rug placed on the sidewalk and he was bowing down on that rug. Praying. He was Muslim. I stood in my tracks and just watched him for a moment. I was wondering in my teenage faith, “Does God hear him? He’s not Christian. Who is he praying to?”

Mustafa must have seen me because when we got in the café, he called me over. “Tom, come sit with me. I want you to meet my brother while we are here in Bethlehem. He’s a doctor and while I’m my mother’s favorite, he’s still a good guy. He’s joining us for lunch today.” And then his brother sat down. He was the man who had been praying on the sidewalk.

Mustafa was Christian and so was I, admittedly not a very mature one. And Mustafa’s brother was Muslim. They clearly loved each other. And we were all at a café eating together not far from where Jesus was born. It kind of burst my wineskins but I think Jesus would have been pleased.

It’s pretty easy to tell ourselves that others are not worthy or equal to us. I know we don’t think that way—at least, we are seldom aware of thinking that way—but it is as common as “no girls allowed.” We are pretty good at building a fence, making a wall, drawing a line. But as soon as we draw that line, Jesus is going to be on the other side of the line, eating with anyone and everyone. Of course, there is a chair for us as well.

I don’t know if Levi was a cheat or not. I don’t know if he was honest or not. We just know Jesus saw something precious and valuable and worthy in him and he gave his life to bring that to the surface.

The thing about Jesus... he will eat with anybody. It’s not that he can’t see that which is broken in us. He can and he does. It’s just that Jesus doesn’t define us by what’s wrong with us. No one is defined by the worst in them. Because that is actually what righteousness looks like.