



Jesus and the Zero-Star Restaurant

TEXT
Luke 5:27-32

June 12, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus walks up to Levi's tax table and says, *Follow me. You'll have some repenting to do, but follow me.*

Levi drops everything and follows. Dropping everything is a little detail. But it points out that following Jesus means we don't live our lives "business as usual." There will be some repenting to do.

Levi's first act is to throw a banquet for Jesus. Of course Jesus came to the banquet. It seems that Jesus was quite the "foodie." We hear about it all the time.

Jesus eats at the home of the Pharisee. Things were just fine until an uninvited woman arrives and anoints Jesus' feet with oil. That made the Pharisee mad.

Jesus eats at the home of Mary and Martha. He sure appreciated Mary paying attention, which created some tension with Martha.

Jesus eats with Zacchaeus. Things went fine at the table; but everyone out in the street fussed about it. He eats bread and wine with his disciples, and then, after the resurrection, he shares some lake trout with them.

Jesus even eats at Levi's house. No one ate at Levi's house. That is to say, no one *respectable* would eat at Levi's house.

Some of Jesus' best stories were about being at the table. There was the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Do you know that one?

And the story of the banquet that everyone backed out of. *Wish I could be there, but I just bought a cow. Accept my regrets.*

It seems Jesus is either on his way from a meal, on his way to a meal, at a meal or talking about a meal (reminds me of my father-in-law). In a surprising number of these meals, there is tension at the table.

Don't you hate it when there is tension at the table? It makes me think of the story I heard when I was an intern during seminary. Maybe was on Session in that little church. She was married to Hampy and had been for over 30 years. The word was that the previous Thanksgiving, Maybe had served her famous meatloaf for the last time.

Maybe liked to have two meats for Thanksgiving. Some people will do turkey and ham, but Maybe was known for serving turkey and meatloaf. I don't know why. Word is her meatloaf was unforgettable, and that wasn't a good thing. She would take her meatloaf to the church night supper, and people would talk about

it. They would say, "Maybe, I don't believe I have ever had anything like this." Or they would say, "Maybe, we just can't stop talking about this meatloaf. Who knew meatloaf could taste like this?" They said those kinds of things.

Well, she brought the meatloaf to the Thanksgiving table, with the whole family gathered around. There was her sister Melba and her husband Earl; their children Eade and Evelyn and her husband Frank; her own son Dink. They were all there. She said, "Hampy, I will put this meatloaf down here by you."

And he said, "I don't think I'll have any today."

She said, "Don't be silly; it's Thanksgiving."

He said, "I know, but I think I'll pass on the meatloaf today."

That's all he said, but something in the way he said it, all of a sudden the light went off, and she realized, "You don't like my meatloaf."

"Now, Maybe, I didn't say that."

She said, "This morning you said that there is no experience in the world like eating my meatloaf." All of a sudden she began to remember all those church night suppers and 30 years of Thanksgivings.

She said, “I hate it. I just made it because I thought you liked it.” It made her so mad she took the plate, walked to the back door and threw the meat loaf into the backyard. She came back to the table, slammed the empty platter on the table and then said, “Hampy, would you like to return thanks?” Don’t you hate it when that happens?

When we think of eating, we prefer to think of the table as being the place of laughter and story. The table is a place of peace and welcome. We don’t want tension. When Jesus comes to the table, there is grace and life and celebration. But he also brings tension.

Jesus wants to dine with Levi. Levi can put whatever menu he wants on the table; it’s still a zero-star restaurant. Nobody eats at Levi’s house. At least nobody *respectable* eats at Levi’s house. That’s because he is not a good man.

One of the most difficult things about Jesus is that he treats bad people differently than we do.

They asked Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with sinners?” There was tension because when Jesus is at table, he is revealing the kingdom of God.

One of the most significant building blocks of culture is how we eat. By culture, I mean the way we are with one another — the values, practices and accepted truths of a given community. One significant vehicle to communicate culture is the practices associated with eating.

There are some rules. I was taught no elbows on the table.

“Tommy, Tommy, strong and able, keep your elbows off the table.” I was taught that you chew your food with your mouth closed. I was taught that table was a place to talk, but only about certain things. It was not cool to talk about your most recent surgery while everyone is eating spaghetti. Not cool!

There are some rules we learn, but they are not spoken out loud. We learn that who you eat with matters. It happens in school. Was it like that in your school cafeteria? My school cafeteria was a very segregated place. There are assigned seats in the cafeteria; it’s a bit like church in that way. The cafeteria is the place where you eat with certain folks and where you refuse to eat with other folks. In my school, the cool kids ate by the stage. The athletes ate right by the kitchen doors. I ate with a small group of kids by the windows. We were in the school chorus together.

We identify ourselves as groups, and you pay attention to where welcome is extended and where it is not. The table is the place of culture.

The problem is that Jesus lives in a different culture than we do. The values, practices and accepted truths of our world are different than the values, practices and accepted truths of his life. His culture is what he calls the kingdom of God. It is a way of being with others that stretches our understandings and practices. So when Levi invites him to dinner, of course, Jesus is going to go.

Why does this matter? Because Levi wasn’t a good person;

he was a tax collector. We have talked before about tax collectors in Jesus’ day. They were often dishonest. They took advantage of folks. They had power over ordinary folks, and they often abused that power. So no good person would want to be at table with someone like that.

There are two things to learn from this story of Jesus at Levi’s table. First, Jesus deals with unrighteousness differently than we do. Our practice is to keep a respectable distance from unrighteousness. If we encounter a person who, from our perspective, is not a good guy, our practice is to create some distance. We don’t invite them to lunch; we create separation.

I went home from worship this morning,¹ and it was only then that I learned the full extent of this morning’s horror in Orlando. I know you have all brought that hurt with you to worship this afternoon. I do not wish to ignore that, nor do I claim particular wisdom, but let me share with you some thoughts shaped by my own faith.

We live in a world of hatred. It was 18 years ago that Matthew Shephard was beaten, tortured and left to die because he was gay. This has to stop.

We live in a world where far too many believe their faith in God is only faithful if they destroy those deemed unrighteous. That is a belief in a tiny God, and it has to stop.

We live in a country where freedom is understood to mean anyone should have access to a military weapon. That is an immature understanding of free-

dom, and we need leaders who are willing to pay the cost to stand up against the prevailing ideologies that leave us powerless to make a change. We need leaders to create the political space to have a mature and intelligent conversation about the relationship between guns and freedom in this country. We cannot simply prevent such conversation and call that freedom.

We live in a time where there is great temptation to assume we have actually accomplished something if we can identify who is righteous and who is unrighteous. But simply identifying the good and the bad does not serve us. It is time we learned to engage evil with good.

This is our world, and this is our nation. This is our culture. We could learn something by how Jesus deals with bad people. And now is the time we need to choose to follow his culture. If we cannot change others, we must not let others change us. Our culture tells us when we see bad people, we create distance — through segregation, through separation and, in the most extreme cases, through destruction.

But Jesus doesn't treat bad people that way. Rather than seeking distance, Jesus is going to be right in the middle of that — because healing and transformation do not result from isolation. They result from engagement. So when Jesus eats, he makes room for the broken and the injured, the unrighteous and the failures. It is the only way for goodness to stand tall in the face of evil; for love to face down

hatred. In Jesus' world, there is a difference between righteousness and what is right.²

You see the truth is, the most unsettling reality is that were Jesus not willing to eat with people who are not good people, well, he would have to eat alone, right? In his presence, none is righteous.

The second is that Jesus never lets our unrighteousness define us. Our evil, our brokenness is never the whole story. When Jesus looks at Levi, he knows what he has done; but he also knows that Levi belongs to God. He does not let the presence of bad block out the presence of good. Jesus sees Levi as a human being. Jesus seems to look at Levi and say, *That which is broken in you does not define you.*

It's hard for us to see that in each other. When we know someone is not a good guy, that tends to be the whole of them in our eyes. The unrighteousness becomes definitive of the person. Sometimes that which is wrong — or not even wrong, just different — becomes that which defines us with one another.

It was 25 years ago now, and I will never forget it. It happened just this way. I went to a Session meeting to welcome new members. By the time I arrived in the parlor, there were several folks there; but one couple, a man and his daughter, had the full attention of the Session. We had never seen them before, and here they were, standing in the church parlor wanting to join.

That's usually good news; but on this day, I am embarrassed to say, there was some tension. It was the girl. She had a haircut

that was unforgettable. On one side of her head, she was shaved clean to the skin. The other side was rather long, and moussed up in spikes that jumped off of her head five or six inches. The spikes were green, which I assumed was a safety precaution; after all, you could probably poke somebody's eye out with one of those spikes.

This was 1988, long before hair like this was cool and this clean-cut, and our suburban Session had never seen anything like this. And one thing I have learned in our culture is that when someone is perceived to be different, it makes us uncomfortable. I was fascinated to see how this would work out. Well, everyone welcomed them. It was beautiful really.

But then I got nervous. After the meeting, Doug walked across the room right for the man and the "spike queen." Doug was on building and grounds because we wanted to keep him away from people. Doug said, "I don't believe I have ever seen you here before."

The gentleman said, "No." It's kind of strange to join a church you have never been to. "Well, some friends told us this was a good place, and we need a church right now."

"Have you even heard our preacher? You might want to give him a 'test drive.' You might not like him; a lot of us don't."

"We would like to be part of a church," the man said.

"Well, you aren't going to know where to sit. Everyone has their place; it's easy to get in someone else's place." And

then an amazing thing happened. Doug said, “Our daughter is off at school. We miss her more than you could imagine. It would mean the world to my wife and me if you would sit with us in church.”

I fell out of my chair. He looked at that young woman, who was finding her way, expressing herself, exploring different things, claiming some personality. He looked through all of that and saw a daughter. And when you see a daughter, that’s the most important thing you see.

So Jesus eats with Levi. He does so because when everyone else sees a tax collector, Jesus sees a child of God, a son. And when he sees that, he’s going to sit at table with him.

That is the deepest truth: We are God’s children. That means that the worst in us is never definitive of us. And when you are a child, there is always a place in the pew. There is always a place at the table. That is what defines you.

Why does he eat with sinners? Because segregation heals nothing; because his love is stronger than hatred; because the sinners are God’s children. And because otherwise, he would have to eat alone — and Jesus would never do that.

¹The printed version of this sermon is the sermon preached in the Gathering. Being at 5:00 Sunday afternoon, some changes to the sermon were included from the morning.

²I am paraphrasing this from a statement Barbara Kingsolver made about her parents. *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), p. 10

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.