

## **“Who Is At Your Table?”**

Psalm 23; Mark 2:13-17, 9:38-41 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know and trust in our hearts that God’s love is for us. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.*

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I can’t believe I’ve never asked this before, since I’ve always been curious, so now after 13 years, I will: does anyone know the history of my desk? The one in the middle of my office? The one that is so tall I have to use a footstool because my chair has to be up so high my feet barely reach the floor? Because from the moment I entered that office and saw it, I assumed it used to be a communion table. Did it used to be a communion table? From before we had this lovely jellybean-shaped table?

It's finally occurred to me to ask, not just because I'm curious but because I was thinking about the connections between our communion table and the tables where we eat the rest of our meals. And the truth is that I eat a lot of meals at that table that is pretending to be a desk, in the middle of my office. To be clear: I am not advocating working through lunch or eating at your desk. This is definitely a “do as I say, not as I do” situation, because I am not a person who has figured out how to feed myself well while also getting the things done that need to be done. What I am advocating is developing a stronger sense of connection between this Table right here in the center of our chancel, and all the other tables in your life where bread is broken. Even if you don't eat that much bread, it's important to see this Table reflected in your other meals.

What's interesting is that I think we're actually pretty likely to connect the other places Jesus shared meals to the communion table. So why don't we do that more naturally for ourselves? Does it feel presumptuous? Have we not taken the time to cultivate enough mindfulness to do so? Would it require adjustments we're not ready to make? Whatever the reason, I think we can learn something from how Jesus shared meals that we should take into account as we're setting our own tables.

Of these two stories from Mark, of course, only one is explicitly about sharing a meal. Jesus has just called Levi – a tax collector!! – as a disciple. Turns out tax collectors, like a lot of us, find most of their friends at work, because once Levi had been called, a bunch of other tax collectors and their dissolute friends tagged along. So now Jesus is having a big, ole meal at Levi's house, with all these other disreputable people. Ironically, the only dialogue we're given isn't about what Jesus is saying to them or teaching them or admonishing them about. What we have instead is the judgmental griping of the scribes. 'Why is he doing that? Why is he doing that with Them? Doesn't he know they're bad? Is he bad?'

The simplicity of Jesus' rationale is so obvious it puts the scribes to shame. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." I mean, when you put it like that! Now we're compelled to consider what it is that the scribes are actually objecting to. Again, we're not given any information about the conversations Jesus has with those tax collectors and sinners. But we do know a little more about another conversation Jesus had with a

tax collector. Remember the story of Zacchaeus? He climbed a tree because he was curious about Jesus, and suddenly Jesus is inviting himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Next thing you know, Zacchaeus is declaring that he's going to give half his possessions to the poor and pay back anyone he cheated four times over. And when I say "next thing you know," I mean immediately. It's not that Jesus came over and thoroughly explained to Zacchaeus the corrupt nature of his line of work and how he'd carried it out. It's not that Jesus promised him mercy if he repented. No, Zacchaeus' promise of reparation came as soon Jesus invited himself over. It's like he'd been waiting for an invitation to enter into a different kind of living.

It starts to seem as though the gripe the scribes have is not with the sinful nature of Jesus' dinner companions, but with the idea that they might actually repent and be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. They thought they had an exclusive invitation, and that was quite a satisfying way to move through the world. If those people get in too, the invitation loses some of its luster.

It's not just the scribes though, is it? Once we get to chapter nine, the disciples are doing it too. They come to Jesus, essentially, to tattletale. "There was this guy and he was casting out demons" – that is, he was relieving people of horrible burdens and bringing real liberation – 'in your name' – not even claiming to do it by his own power. But here's the kicker: "We tried to stop him because he was not following us." This guy is doing good work; he's connecting it directly to Jesus, and the disciples think he must be stopped because he wasn't hanging out with them.

‘He’s not in, right, Jesus?’ ‘He’s not one of us, right, Jesus?’ ‘You’re for us, not random other people, right, Jesus?’ Can you imagine the look on Jesus’ face? Or can we not see it because his forehead is pressed to his palm? ‘Seriously, people? What have I done to make you think this is about who is in and who is out, rather than bringing liberation to every person we possibly can? Have you been paying any attention whatsoever?’ There is no record in the gospel of an exasperated sigh taking place, but even if it was silent, surely it was felt. “Do not stop him;” Jesus tells them, “for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

People are going to do this differently. That doesn’t mean they are wrong; it doesn’t mean we are wrong. It just means people are people, and faithfulness doesn’t look the same for all of us. There is no benefit in getting hung up on who does it our way and who does it differently. Our salvation is not diminished by someone else also being liberated. To keep score is to miss the point entirely. To concern ourselves with someone else’s disqualifying sinfulness is to lose track of our own invitation to the party. So who is at your table? Who is at Jesus’ table? Are we ready to break bread with the other people at Jesus’ Table? Does it matter if we’re ready, if the Cup of God’s Mercy is there to work its holy transformation on our hearts?

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is generally thought of as a psalm of comfort. We read it at memorial services precisely because it speaks to us of the solace of God’s presence and guidance and nurture. But even the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm doesn’t promise to leave us as we are.

I've long been fascinated by the implications of the beginning of verse 5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." I would argue that we have two choices about how to interpret this line: either we think that God is setting up a table just in front of us, feeding us with nourishing, strengthening food, in front of vanquished foes who have to watch, hungrily, while receiving nothing; OR we assume that part of having our souls restored, as the psalm earlier promised, is that we are invited to a table to share in a feast with our enemies.

Given what you know about the God of Jesus, the God of Abraham and Jacob, of Jonah and Isaiah and Ruth, of Mary Magdalen and Peter and Prisca and Paul, which scenario seems more likely? That God would reward the winners, smugly offering them their victory feast, as the losers' tummies rumble? Or that we are all invited to a table together, perhaps even seated next to that person who does things so very differently than we do?

Maybe it isn't any of our business what someone else's sin is. Maybe the things that look so foreign and unsettling to us aren't actually sin in the first place, but just different ways of being human. Following Jesus isn't about who's in and who's out; it's not about keeping score or even winning. It's about love and liberation. It's about nourishing all souls with the Bread of Life. It's about speaking truth, not to judge but to release and repair. It's about welcome and hospitality and unconditional acceptance. It's not about feeling more secure with where we are, but about following Jesus to where he's going. It's about breaking bread with those who are hungry, whether there's an

actual table present or not. Who is at your table? Maybe we don't need to answer that question, but to question that question. Is it my table? Is it your table? Or is the table always and forever God's table, the Table of Christ's mercy and compassion? Can any table where thanks are truly given be a table that excludes? To give thanks is to recognize that nothing we have to share came from our own worth or work. Our blessings are from God, and they are intended to be shared.

As we gather for meals this week, whether at long tables with large, extended family, or where it is just you and Jesus in your recliner or at your desk, let us keep this Table in mind. Let us hold in our hearts all those who are hungry and in need of nourishment, all those who are soulsick and in need of a physician of the Spirit, all those who have been barred from fellowship by those intent on keeping their own invitation exclusive. Let us give thanks with hearts that are open and light, so grateful for the hospitality of God that we can't help but share it broadly. Let us gather at the Table of Christ Jesus. Hallelujah and Amen.