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Jesus Eats With Sinners

A Communion Meditation

Mark 2:13-17

by David Crawford

He went out again beside the sea and all the crowd gathered around him and he taught them. And as he passed along, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with tax collectors and sinners, they told his disciples, "He eats with tax collectors and sinners." And when Jesus heard it, he told them, "Those who are well do not need a physician, rather those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, rather I came to call sinners" (Mark. 2:13-17).

Among the most intriguing episodes in the Gospel of Mark are those that rehearse the call of the first disciples. The sparseness of Mark's narrative evokes in the reader a sense of perplexity and wonder: Why would Peter and Andrew, and James and John have left livelihood and family with only the cryptic assurance that Jesus would make them "fishers of men?" Even more baffling is the call of Levi the tax collector. Why would Levi follow, and why would Jesus call a person from such a contemptible group? That Jesus would seek common fishermen to be his followers is a little surprising, but still understandable. Like himself, they were working-class people who presumably engaged in honest labor with reasonable industry and integrity and who might be expected to do likewise in God's Kingdom. But a tax collector? It would scarcely have been more shocking

had Robin Hood invited the sheriff of Nottingham to join his band of merry men.

It is not simply that Jesus sought disciples from among the common people, nor that he sought them from among those whom even the common people despised. No, his call to sinners was more profound than that. It was also an invitation to recline and break bread with him, to share his food as if they were a part of his own family (Mark 3:31-35). The invitation was spread about like a farmer scattering seed. Certain of the righteous religious leaders heard the call and came to question the guest list and to accuse the host. Not so among the conspicuously sinful, who heard the invitation, followed and reclined with him around the table.

As long ago as the prophets there was a particular understanding about the matter of table fellowship. One might recall Saul's reaction to Samuel's pronouncement and dinner invitation:

Am I not a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way? (1 Samuel 9:21).

Despite his family's wealth, it was apparently unusual for Saul to have been numbered among the invited guests. Nevertheless Samuel prevailed upon this young man whose regal appearance belied his lowly birth and status, and so that day Saul sat at the head of the table with Samuel the prophet of God.

One thousand years later the world of the New Testament was replete with detailed advice on how to conduct a socially correct dinner party: the host should provide suitable food and wine, and should invite guests of his own status and culture, the most eminent seated closest to himself. Though Nazareth was less than a thriving metropolis, even by Galilean standards, still it is unlikely that Jesus was ignorant of the rules. And yet the truth of the matter is that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.

The small group of Jews who withdrew to the deserted shores of the Dead Sea were searching for purity in a world polluted by sin. Holiness by exclusion was their stock-in-trade. According to the Community Rule found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, anyone who would be a part of their company "must separate from all the men of falsehood who walk in the way of wickedness." The sinful were strictly prohibited from participating in the "pure meal of the saints, for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn from their wickedness: for all who transgress His word are unclean" (1 QS 5). That Jesus should preach the nearness of God's reign and call the sinful to repentance was certainly not unheard of. That he should have intimate fellowship with the notoriously sinful was an altogether different matter.

The conventional wisdom had always been that the sinner must be shunned. With a little imagination one can almost hear the objections: First let the sinner repent and the tax collector make restitution, and then we will welcome them to the table. This Galilean should be more concerned about his reputation. Can it be that he condones sin? Why, it is scandalous that one who speaks so much of God should be accompanied by such, much less that he should eat with tax collectors and sinners.

We correctly think of our weekly gathering around the table as fellowship with the community of believers. But it should also be more than that. We must try to break through our pride to have fellow-

ship as a community of sinners; otherwise, we are doomed to dine alone, each concealing our own sin from the other. It is right that we know the fact of our own forgiveness and that we rejoice in God's grace without inhibition. The problem, however, is this: pride seeks to hide from others the enormity of the debt that is paid. Pride looks for a lever to elevate self above others, and regards others as requiring a larger helping of God's grace. Rather than sinning boldly, we tend to practice a subtle form of hypocrisy and deceit, lest the extent of our sinfulness be revealed and we lose some of the satisfaction that comes from being first among equals. When it happens that the cloak of false righteousness is wrestled away from one in our midst and their real sinfulness is exposed, we could barely be more shocked if they appeared naked in public.

The fact is that we are all notorious sinners of one kind or another. If we would sit at Jesus' table and dine with him, we ought to do so without guilt and without pretense, neither dwelling on our own sinfulness, nor seeking to conceal it from others. Rather let us celebrate the truth of that glorious accusation; for indeed, Jesus does eat with tax collectors and sinners, like us. The resurrected Jesus spoke these words to Christians at Laodicea:

... you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. . . . Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:17-18, 20).

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