

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Called to Hospitality

Luke 5:27-32

Many parts of our church building have been a lot less active during the past two years, due to the ongoing pandemic. One of them is our hospitality closet. Thankfully, with the resumption of Sunday School last fall, we've been able to open it up and use it a little more to help provide some supplies and equipment for coffee, juice, and prepackaged pastries. But a lot of the plates, tableware, cups, containers, and other resources that were in the closet in early 2020 are still in there today. COVID has taken numerous things away from our congregation, including the gift of eating together.

This is no minor loss. Especially when we gathered after worship for our monthly fellowship meal, we were getting more than just nutrition. We were each bringing a part to contribute to the whole. We were nurturing relationships. We were forming bonds in Christ. We were cultivating unity. We were catching up on one another's lives. We were welcoming newcomers. We were practicing one of the primary marks of Christian discipleship, namely, hospitality.

Table fellowship has always been an important practice in the Christian faith, and the Jewish faith from which it emerged. Now from a Christian perspective, this means not only table fellowship with those who have decided to follow Jesus, but also with those who are considering faith in Jesus, who are exploring his call to become a disciple. Teacher and pastor Barry Jones has put it well when he writes:

I'm convinced that our dinner tables have the potential to be the most "missional" places in all of our lives. Perhaps before we invite people to Jesus or invite them to church, we should invite them to dinner. If table fellowship is a spiritual discipline that is vital for shaping and sustaining our life with God for the world, we need to make a point to share our tables with people who are in our lives but far from God. This was one of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus's ministry.¹

We see an example of this in today's Scripture passage from Luke. Jesus calls Levi to be a disciple. In the First Gospel, he's called Matthew (9:9). In our text, even before we learn his name we're told that this man is a tax collector. He's at his station, a tax office where he collects tolls on any goods being transported into the region ruled by Herod Antipas. So Levi is a customs official, which means that in the eyes of most Jewish folks, he's a collaborator with their Roman oppressors. There's also a good chance that Levi has become pretty wealthy through his work as a tax collector, though this may be partly the result of extortion or other shady methods. The bottom line is that many of the faithful, especially the religious leaders, view Levi as a violator of the Mosaic law, a corrupted, greedy character who is in bed with the enemy. He isn't kingdom of God/disciple of Jesus kind of material, at least the way most people see things.

But Jesus doesn't see things, especially people, the way that most people do. Jesus' summons to discipleship isn't based on religious qualifications but on the mercy and love of God, which extends across the boundaries that society, including its religious institutions, has constructed. That's why Jesus himself, as the embodiment of God's saving mercy, crosses boundaries and breaks down barriers that keep certain groups of people on the

margins of the community. And one of the ways Jesus does this is by practicing table fellowship with folks who were viewed as outcasts.

In that day and time, you were tied to the people you ate with, the people whose hospitality you accepted. If they were regarded as good and upright, then you, by association, were good and upright too. If their faith walk was questionable, then yours soon probably would be too. If they were outside the community of the holy, then your own holiness was in jeopardy too. Add to this the pressure exerted by religious dietary laws, and you can see the kind of risks Jesus was taking in his daily ministry. In today's text, Jesus isn't just a guest at Levi's home. He's *the* guest. Levi organizes the whole feast in honor of Jesus. He even invites a bunch of his associates from the Roman Revenue Service, along with plenty of others who certainly aren't upstanding members of the local synagogue.

So why does Jesus do things like saying yes to Levi's invitation? Why does Jesus, especially in Luke's Gospel, seem always to be on his way to or from a meal? Is it because he never turns down an opportunity to mix with the townsfolk? Or is he just a faithful churchgoer who's normally the first in line at the Sunday potluck? No, Jesus' devotion to eating with others is about much more than just food. Most of all, it's about God's kingdom. Jesus views hospitality as a way of proclaiming and enacting the reign of God. In other words, Jesus uses the sharing of meals as a way of throwing open the doors of God's fellowship hall and welcoming others in.

In the eyes of many, especially some of the religious leaders, Jesus' practice of table fellowship undermined holiness. It blurred the lines between insiders and outsiders. But as pastor Mark Ralls has pointed out, for Jesus, holiness wasn't primarily a matter of separation and preservation of distinctions. Table fellowship was more about reuniting and bringing together the disparate. Ralls describes an experience from his own ministry that helped him understand the sanctifying power of hospitality. During the summer between college and seminary, he interned in a small rural church. Much of the time it was a lonely experience, until one day when he heard a light tap on the screen door. Ralls says:

It was Mrs. Mills. She had shuffled across the street in her housecoat to welcome me. In her hands she held a fried pie, the kind that comes individually wrapped at the convenience store. At 94, she explained, she had retired from baking. But still she wanted to share dessert. I invited her in and somehow, by the grace of God, was able to find two clean forks in the kitchen.

So began an almost nightly ritual during the summer of 1988: Mrs. Mills at my screen door bearing gifts. A Little Debbie snack cake. A handful of vanilla wafers. Powdered-sugar donuts. Each night the offering was different but the offer the same -- dessert and conversation until it started to get dark.

At first our conversations were stilted, hesitant. But after a while I forgot the 74 years between us. I stopped seeing Mrs. Mills as some porcelain antiquity. She became flesh and blood, a friend.

And to my surprise, I learned that in this final stage of her life, she felt as displaced as I did. One evening in mid-August, just before the summer program ended and seminary began, Mrs. Mills took a long sip of milk as if to steady her resolve and then asked tentatively, "How would it be if from now on you called me Granny?"

I still think the greatest gift of that summer was the lesson she taught me in Christian hospitality.²

According to Ralls, Jesus' holiness was manifested in his hospitality toward those who were seemingly least like himself. In his presence, they experienced a wholeness that comes from being summoned and welcomed into the kingdom.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick," says Jesus. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (vv. 31-32). Though Jesus may not have been making the specific connection, it's important to note that the words "hospital" and "hospitality" come from the same Latin word, and can lead to the same result, namely, healing. Our Lord has come to heal our relationship with God and with one another.

Christian hospitality is one of the ways that Jesus still works to heal by calling people into the life of God's kingdom. That's because holy things can happen around the table. Just ask Levi, or any of the other individuals who shared a meal with Jesus. Their testimonies could probably help us recover the spiritual discipline of table fellowship, the holy habit of hospitality.

As you practice the discipline of hospitality in your own life, you can help strengthen believers and open the doors of community to others who need to come to faith in Christ. The table you share could be here at our church, though we'll have to wait and see when that day comes again. Or it could be the table in your own home where you welcome others to eat, talk, and share, though COVID has interfered with that option too. It could be the table at a restaurant where you invite someone to join you for a meal and conversation about all sorts of things, including the reality of the kingdom of God. It could even be the front seat of your car, with your own lap as the table, where you unwrap the fast food and sit and talk with your child, your spouse, your friend, your coworker, or whoever's in the passenger seat. Through a shared meal, boundaries can be crossed and connections made.

Author Max Lucado writes about how the early church used hospitality to cross the boundaries that divided people from one another, and how we can do the same thing in our own day and time. Lucado says:

We wonder the same thing today. Can Hispanics live in peace with Anglos? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can a Christian family carry on a civil friendship with the Muslim couple down the street? Can divergent people get along?

The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can't be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.³

The call to follow Jesus, to have him be Lord of your life, is a call to hospitality. Most of what I've said today has to do with hospitality in the sense of welcoming others to a shared meal. But hospitality is about more than just food. Hospitality, in the larger sense, is about living a Christ-centered life that's open to and inviting of others, especially those who are overlooked or excluded, those who are marginalized, those whom you may perceive as the enemy. Being a disciple of Jesus involves reaching out, making room, creating space in your life for others who need to experience the reality of God's reign. At a time when we often have to go through an extended decision-making process just to determine whether it's wise to meet together for a meal, whether at home or in a restaurant, it helps to remember that extending the hospitality of the gospel can take many forms, all of them grounded in doing what Jesus did and welcoming others in his name.

¹ Barry D. Jones, "The Dinner Table as a Place of Connection, Brokenness, and Blessing." DTS Magazine website. October 1, 2015. Accessed March 1, 2017 <<http://www.dts.edu/read/a-place-at-the-table-jones-barry/>>.

² Mark Ralls. Faith & Leadership website. Duke Divinity School. February 10, 2015. Accessed March 1, 2017 <<https://www.faithandleadership.com/mark-ralls-taking-practice-hospitality-lent>>.

³ Max Lucado, *Outlive Your Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 2010) 55.