

We continue our Lenten series, Meeting Jesus at the Table. Based on the book by Cynthia Campbell. Today we will consider what it means to have The Welcome Table. And we will use yet another one of Jesus dining experiences. Today we turn to Matthew, and the story of Jesus dining with those despisable, designed to be hated tax collectors.

While I love the home I am in now, it is small and not conducive to hosting dinner parties. I love hosting dinner parties. Although some people hate the idea of all that goes with a dinner party, I love it. Planning the menus, shopping for the food. Shopping make sure that we have all the food needed, and that everyone has their favorite drink. Then there's the scheduling, all the cooking, to make sure everything comes together at the just right time.

Who was invited to our dinner gatherings? Of course family, significant others, and close friends. But over time another group was added to the list. You could always count on our dinner gatherings to include random guests. People who I knew were alone. There was this idea that including them would be good for them and us. So yes, I would invite them into the chaos that's always been our home.

The idea of an invitation to a dinner party can bring up many emotions. You may have been someone who was invited to everything. The life of the party. But then there are those who were never invited to anything. Never included. Not chosen for the team. Not chosen to be selected to be in a club. Overlooked, bypassed, avoided. Like so much of life, dinner parties can be reminders of the pain of interpersonal relationships, or they can be great occasions of joy and life-giving connections. Think about how often a meal of yours has served to heal wounds, restore broken relationships, and give birth to new communities and new ideas.

There was a movie that was released in 1987 called Babette's Feast. It was based on a story by Karen Blixen, better known by her pen name Isak Dinesen. Karen is best known for her story and movie, Out of Africa.

Babette's feast is set in a small community of Lutheran pietists in Denmark. The once vibrant community has eroded and those left are older members who harbor a lot of grudges. The main character, Babette is forced to flee France during the Franco Prussian War. She seeks refuge in this small community. She goes to work for two elderly sisters as a servant. Then Babette finds out that she has won the lottery. Instead of spending the money on herself, she decides to spend it to prepare an elaborate feast for the crusty old members of this community.

The day of the feast arrives. Although the members of community pledged not to "enjoy" these worldly pleasure, the wine flows and so do conversations, confessions, and ultimately healing. This feast serves as the spark to faith, rebuilding the community and life anew.

Try to think of any story involving Jesus and a meal, that didn't involve a very eclectic guest list, as was the case in Babette's Feast. In any given story you could find friends or enemies. You could find the curious, the critical, or the devoted. There were dinner parties and wedding banquets. So many different types of meals and guests

Because we don't like random and prefer neat tidy boxes. Let's see if we can straighten these wildly diverse dining categories into similar themes.

One theme of Jesus' dining experiences involves a great banquet. This symbolism traces back to the OT prophet Isaiah. When Jesus compared the kingdom of God to someone who hosted a banquet, his readers would be drawn back to Isaiah, particularly chapter 25:6. "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

Another theme is one of extending and receiving hospitality. We extend hospitality to others just as God extends hospitality to us. Think back to Psalm 23:5 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...my cup overflows."

There's one more theme we can use. Eating with others as an ethical or moral matter. In Jesus time, sharing a meal created or cemented relationships. It mattered with whom you "broke bread". This is what makes today's story so noteworthy.

Let's recall the story again. Jesus is walking through Capernaum, and he passes the tax booth where Matthew is working. To the amazement of all, especially Matthew, Jesus turns to him and says. "Follow me,". Matthew doesn't blink. He drops everything and follows Jesus.

Next, we enter into the dinner scene. Matthew hosts a big dinner party for Jesus and his other disciples. Understandably, Matthew has invited some friends. Matthew's available pool of friends would be limited, He would be shunned by his Jewish family and community for being a tax collector. His other guests then would be just like him. Tax collectors and sinners.

Here, among these salty dinner companion, Jesus will hear a criticism that will be repeated again and again and again. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners."

To understand this protest, we need to understand the role of a tax collector. Collecting taxes in the Roman Empire was a franchise opportunity. McRomans anyone? If a region like Galilee or Judea found itself in need of a taxing franchise, bids would be put out to the population. The winning bidder would then hire individuals in the region's villages and towns to collect taxes.

Rome would set an amount that they expected to receive from each individual. The tax collector was then allowed to "gross up" the taxes for their fees. No possibility of cheating here, right?

But the risk of being cheated by the tax collector wasn't the only problem, the bigger issue was where the taxes were going. Rome. This made the tax collector a traitor in the eyes of the people in their villages. Both religious leaders and ordinary people would have hatred for someone like Matthew.

In this passage we hear Matthew's "Call Story". It is much like the calling for Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Matthew's call is the last one recorded in this gospel.

Matthew's call-story is a story of healing. As Jesus says in response to his critics. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Matthew's healing occurred when he decided to walk away from his former life and follow Jesus. Coincidentally, Matthew's call story is situated between two collections of healing stories.

Back in Jesus time, when someone became ill, they were typically isolated or quarantined. When they were restored to health, they were able to return to their family and friends. This is exactly what Jesus does here. Matthew's ostracism ends and he is restored to community, Jesus' community. He is invited into fellowship with Jesus and his disciples.

Finally, this is a story about mercy. Jesus makes this clear by quoting another Old Testament prophet in Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." What exactly does Jesus mean here? Is he saying that sacrifice is no longer important to the Jewish people? Of course not.

For at least one thousand years, a cornerstone of Jewish worship involved sacrifices to God. Sacrifices were important throughout many parts of the life of a Jew. After the birth of a child, as a sign of repentance and requests for forgiveness. During major festivals like Passover and Succoth, sacrifices were offered as an expression of gratitude to God. Sacrifices were always partnered with prayers of petition. Sacrifice itself was prayer enacted.

Here's what Jesus was saying. Sacrifices are still important. But sacrifices are empty without acts of mercy and compassion. Especially given the fact that God's mercy is everlasting. God proved that in sending Jesus, the human form of God. In our story today, Jesus lives out the mercy of God by eating with outcasts. Today's dining experience shows that all are welcome, even in our brokenness.

What about us, church family. Who is welcome to be a part of St. Johns UMC. Who belongs and who doesn't? Do we hold some at arm's length? How wide are our boundaries in Kingman and in America? Don't worry if you don't have a good answer for that right now. Churches have struggled with this since the beginning. Back then it was Jews and Gentiles, Slave and Free, Women and Men. Their debates can be found in the words of Acts and in Paul's letters, especially to the Galatians and the Romans.

In America we asked questions long ago when slavery of Africans was legal. We struggle today as we wrestle with the place of our LGBTQIA+ siblings in Christian Fellowship. We United Methodists are emerging from a split over that very subject. We've looked across scripture come to this conclusion.

Welcome always wins. Inclusion always wins. The wideness of God's mercy reaches out to those on whatever margins society creates.

The Welcome Table can be summed up in this simple fact. Hospitality transforms. Those who host and those who are guests are impacted and changed by the relationships formed around breaking and sharing bread. While both churches and our nation continue the journey of learning to be more welcoming and more inclusive, we have something to guide us. Think about those experiences when you broke bread with others who were separated or estranged. In those experiences wasn't it surprising to find that you were also changed and gained greater freedom. All because you said yes to Meeting Jesus at the Table. Let us pray.