

“At the Table with Jesus”

Introduction: In the section of the gospel we’ve been reading through over the past weeks Matthew has placed great emphasis on the authority of Jesus in the picture he’s been sketching for us of this remarkable man we have come to know as the Son of God. We’ve seen it in his teaching, in his power over illness, in his control over nature and the spirit world, and in his right to pronounce God’s forgiveness. His authority, we said last week, is not one that seeks to coerce, force, or abuse, but to free, heal, and restore. And it is Matthew’s contention that in Jesus, and through the authority that he exercises, the kingdom of God has begun to dawn on earth, as it is in heaven, as Jesus taught us to pray.

However, the coming of God’s kingdom has begun to come in some unexpected ways, at least as far as the religious authorities of the day were concerned. The movement that Jesus was starting looked different, and felt uncomfortable, to them. We’ll see this discomfort begin to surface in living color as they observed Jesus hanging out, in their minds, with all the wrong sort of people, including Matthew himself! Let’s hear our texts, and then consider the radical call that comes to Matthew from Jesus, and how that can be both challenging, and helpful, to us.

I. A Radical Call

A. We see this radical call of Jesus as he takes another walk (cf. Mk. 2:14) along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. On the first walk that we read about (Ma. 4:18-22), we heard him call four fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James, and John – to follow him and begin to learn from him what the kingdom of God is all about, and to train them to now “fish for people.” The Sermon on the Mount and several healings later, we hear Jesus issue the same call to Matthew. Now, calling fishermen to join with him is one thing, but Matthew is a tax collector, which might as well mean he was a crook, at least as far as the Jews who lived and traveled in that region were concerned.

B. Taxes paid to the Roman government were collected by local fellows in ancient Palestine. They were required to collect a certain amount of money; whatever else they were able to collect would serve as their commission. As a result, these collectors had a tendency to extort as much as possible from their own countrymen and, backed by Roman soldiers, became seen as working for the enemy. Matthew’s tax booth was probably situated such that he collected tolls from both the commercial traffic in the region as well as the fish caught in the Sea of Galilee. Bottom line? Matthew was not a well-liked or well-respected man among his countrymen.

C. Whether Matthew had met Jesus before this encounter we can’t be sure. However, I think it likely that he had both heard about, and even seen some of, the work that Jesus had been doing in the region. Further, it is quite possible that Matthew, no matter how wealthy he had become, was growing emotionally weary of the life he had been living. He had a sense that his position, and the wealth and power that came with it, somehow weren’t enough. Ripping off his countrymen on a daily basis just didn’t feel right. So, when Jesus extended the offer, “Follow me,” it’s likely that Matthew didn’t think twice. This amazing man wanted him?! And so, as Matthew himself describes it, he got up, literally, “he arose,” and went with Jesus. This new opportunity must have felt like a resurrection, or like a kind of healing miracle (and maybe that’s why Matthew puts his call in the middle of a number of healings by Jesus). So, off he went.

II. A Radical Meal

A. Though he didn't go far, as least right away, Instead, Matthew almost immediately it seems, threw a dinner party at his home for Jesus and his disciples, and many of Matthew's crooked friends. He couldn't wait for them to meet this Jesus who had turned his life around. It was, it turns out, a radical meal, at least as far as the religious authorities were concerned. That's because sharing a meal, sitting at table, was considered in the first century to be a very personal, even intimate act. Who in their right mind would dare to hang out with such a disreputable group? An ancient, devout Jew named Clementine puts it as follows (*Clementine Homilies*, 13.4):

Nor do we take our food from the same table as Gentiles [sinners], inasmuch as we cannot eat along with them because they live impurely. But when we have persuaded them to have true thoughts, and to follow a right course of action, and have baptized them with a thrice blessed invocation, then we dwell with them. For not even if it were our father, or mother, or wife, or child, or brother, or any other one having a claim by nature on our affection, can we venture to take our meals with him; for our religion compels us to make a distinction.

B. So, unless you cleaned yourself up first, it was thought that you in no way should try to enjoy fellowship with God's people, and in no way should God's people seek to enjoy fellowship with you, especially around a table. If last week we heard the beginning of opposition to Jesus question how he could declare someone's sins to be forgiven, now they are questioning why he would even consider eating with tax collectors and sinners. A couple of chapters later we hear this question turned into a charge that Jesus is "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (11:19). This phrase, "glutton and drunkard," is found in Deut. 21:18-21 to describe a wicked and rebellious person who should be put to death! Jesus, in other words, because he was eating with folks considered to be far from God, was considered to be worthy of death! Indeed, this movement that Jesus was starting was looking far different than the religious leaders had imagined; it was making them most uncomfortable.

C. Of course, if you were either Mathew, or one of his colleagues, you were thrilled! This man of God was willing to hang with you, just because. He hadn't given you a list of things to do before he would join you at the table; he just pulled up a chair, sat down, asked questions that actually expressed an interest in who you were, and in the midst of it all began talking about a new kind of life that you might consider living, one fueled by the mercy and love God had for you.

III. A Needed Reorientation

A. It was this kind of mercy that Jesus tried to bring to the attention of the Pharisees when he heard them question his choice of dinner companions. While the Pharisees might have been immaculate in their worship practices, they were way too proud of their own perceived goodness. Their righteousness, they thought, came from following the law, but they were not as good as they imagined. Further, their lives were sadly devoid of mercy. So, Jesus points them back to the prophets they knew well – Hosea and Micah – and the emphasis both had on mercy, on internal heart transformation instead of external religious ritual:

"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hos. 6:6)

"Shall I come before [the LORD] with burnt offerings? . . . He has shown you, O mortal, what is good . . . to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic. 6:6-8)

B. Jesus folded this sentiment into a metaphor in which he referred to himself as a doctor who knew that to minister to the sick, he would need to interact with them, not avoid them. It was through mercy that he had reached out to Matthew, and through mercy that he was reaching out to Matthew's friends.

IV. Table Fellowship

A. A few years ago you may recall a sermon series in which we focused on the many times we see Jesus sitting around a table and revealing an aspect of the kingdom of God as he shared a meal with any number of different people. Tables, Jesus teaches us, are sacred spaces. Sharing tables with others reminds us that there is more to food than fuel; a table is a basic expression of hospitality that can nourish us spiritually as well as physically. God, it seems, has a way of showing up at tables. In fact, a table is at the center of both the OT (Passover) and the NT (communion). As my brother-in-law is fond of saying, food is God's love made delectable, which means that sharing a meal with others is one of the primary ways we pass God's love around.

B. So, a few thoughts as we finish this text.

1. First, know that there is nothing you can do to keep Jesus away from your table. No matter how crooked you've been, he desires to sit down with you, eat with you, and show you that God still loves you and invites you to follow him.

One way to put this was expressed by Tim Wakefield, the recently deceased Red Sox pitcher who described the effect of his faith in Christ in this way: "Before [coming to faith], I worked hard but I wasn't at ease. Now, in a lot of tough situations ... knowing that God is gracious regardless of my performance helps me to control my frustrations."

2. Second, if tables are where we find connection and belonging, can we think about table fellowship as a spiritual discipline that we engage in in order to strengthen our friendship and experience of community among those whom Jesus has called? Who might you join for a slow meal around a table as you seek to encourage one another and grow in your life of faith?

3. Third, as Jesus often, as we've seen, used tables for missional purposes, who might you share your table with whose life seems far from God? Maybe, one writer suggests (Barry D. Jones, *The Dinner Table as a Place of Connection, Brokenness, and Blessing*), before we invite people to Jesus, or even invite them to church, we should invite them to dinner where we simply desire to get to know them for who they are and to pay attention to how God's mercy might touch their lives.

Above all we need to remind ourselves that, as the prophet Isaiah describes it, in that great day when all that is wrong will be made right, and all that is broken will be made whole, there's going to be one extravagant meal to celebrate. Until that day, let's consider using our tables to help us enjoy a foretaste of that great feast.