

“The Table of The King”

Introduction: A couple of fall seasons ago I helped coach the cross country teams at Gordon College. My boss during that venture, head coach Samantha, encouraged me to get to know the guys on the team at times outside of practice. So I made arrangements to meet some of them for lunch at the college cafeteria. I arrived, got my food, and headed to the tables. But I couldn't find anyone on the team. All of a sudden I started to feel a little uneasy! What was I going to do? Should I sit down? Where should I sit? If I picked an empty table, would anyone come to sit with me? If someone did come, who would that be, and what would they think? Then I said to myself, “I am over twice the age of anyone in this room; who cares what people think!?”

Apparently, cafeteria angst dies hard. Whether it's your first day of first grade, or your first day of freshman year in high school or college, or even your first day on the job, that first trip to the cafeteria or lunchroom can be intimidating. So much social stuff goes on around a table, and so much of our identity comes through the people with whom we sit.

If that's true in the 21st c., it was even more true in the 1st c. when Jesus lived. In fact, Jesus did some of his best work around a table, whether he was celebrating the Passover, or dining with a couple of confused followers after his resurrection, or enjoying a wedding banquet, or feeding a crowd at a picnic, or sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners. We'll look at one instance of the latter this morning, especially since the dinner companions that Jesus chose to keep seemed highly questionable to some. What does King Jesus want to teach us about himself, and about the kingdom of God, through his time at the table? Jesus offers both a radical welcome and a radical call.

I. The radical welcome of Jesus.

A. We see this radical welcome of Jesus as he takes another walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Last time he did this we heard him call four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, to follow him and begin to experience and learn what the kingdom of God is all about. On this particular walk, Jesus was not only teaching as we went, he was keeping his eye out for potential disciples. When he spotted a fellow named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth, Jesus invited him to follow along. Now, given that tax collectors were famous for their dishonesty and extortion, and for pursuing riches over righteousness, and given that they were actually hated because they really worked for the enemy—the occupying power of Rome—a tax collector seems like a poor candidate for a discipleship program!

B. What's more, to the religious authorities of the day, known as Pharisees, Jesus hardly seemed like a good candidate to teach such a program. For, when we next see Jesus, he has found his way to Levi's house and is enjoying table fellowship with Levi and all of his tax collecting, and other sinful, friends! Who would dare hang out with such a despicable, disreputable, crowd? You are the company that you keep, the Jewish leaders believed. Moreover, companionship with sinners would not only ruin your reputation, their immoral behavior might rub off on you. Here is how this sentiment is expressed by one devout Jew (*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.

C. So, unless you cleaned yourself up first, it was thought that you in no way belonged in God's presence, and certainly no one else should be in yours. This fellow Jesus should know this, they reasoned, especially if he fashioned himself as some kind of holy, godly guy. But as Jesus put it, "It's not the healthy that need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous"—those who think that they've got their act cleaned up—"but sinners." Like a good physician, who doesn't wait until patients recover before seeing or treating them, Jesus, known as the Great Physician, doesn't wait until we've got it all together before treating us.

I was thinking about this while walking the beach up in Bladeford, ME last Monday afternoon. Somehow God always speaks to me up there through a piece of his gorgeous creation. As I pondered the grand ocean stretched out before me I began to see it as a picture of God's wide and all-encompassing mercy. I was then reminded of the opening line of an old hymn which declares: "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. . ." So, if you think you somehow don't qualify for God's mercy, if you think you'll never get a seat at his table because of your past life or current issues, whatever they may be, think again. You're just the kind of person King Jesus is looking for; he wants to sit down at table with you and invite you to experience life in his kingdom.

II. The radical call of Jesus.

A. Of course, to experience the kingdom life that is truly life is to recognize that being at table with Jesus is not just a joyful party. It is that; it is a great, wedding-like celebration. But at the same time, this radical welcome of Jesus comes with a radical call. He calls those he's welcomed to go home by another way. That is, when the grace of God touches you in Jesus, Jesus then calls you to follow him and not go home to live the same old life you've been living but to follow him and live in the direction of God's truth. The Great Physician is looking to heal, to transform the "sin-sick soul."

B. I don't know why all those tax collectors and sinner friends of Levi came to his house to break bread with Jesus on that day. Probably Levi invited them, seeing in Jesus a way out and forward from the dead-end life Levi recognized they were all leading. They came to investigate this Jesus. He welcomed them. And then he called them to the repentance and faith and obedience that would lead to new life. Levi would learn this as he spent the next three years following Jesus on the path of discipleship. He would become so transformed by Jesus and the life in the kingdom of God that Jesus revealed in his own life that he would write the most complete discipleship manual we have. We know it as the gospel of Matthew, in which Levi the former tax collector, identifies himself as the disciple with that (possibly new?) name (Ma. 9:9).

III. The table as a missional space

A. Perhaps in our fast-paced, technology-saturated, attention-deficit-disordered, grab a plate and sit in front of the television world, it would be good to recapture what life about our own tables could look like. A table, as Jesus sees it, is a sacred space where God is present. It's a space where not only food is shared, but stories are exchanged, memories and dreams are acknowledged, laughter and tears flow, and even sins are confessed.

B. Moreover, a table can be a learning and missional place. NT scholar Tom Wright observes that when Jesus wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal, through which he taught them what was going to happen to him and why. In thinking about this meal, called Passover, author and pastor Eugene Peterson observes that the pattern of thanking, breaking, and giving that goes on in this meal displays the shape of the Christian life. The table is where we give thanks for God's grace in our lives, it is where we find forgiveness and restoration from our brokenness, and it can be a place where we share God's love with others. In this regard, maybe, before we invite people to Jesus or to church, we might consider inviting them to dinner!

So as we come together to that table of the Lord this morning: How is Jesus showing you his radical, grace-filled welcome? How might he be calling you to leave his table and live differently than when you came? And how might he be inviting you use your own table to minister grace and love to those who are in your life but far from him?