

Communion Meditation on Luke 15:1-2

Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

The Good News is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

But who is this Christ and how does this reconciliation happen? No one—not even Jesus’ own disciples or the Apostle Paul—saw the answer to this question more clearly than the Pharisees. All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

The Pharisees (then as well as now) didn’t like it, of course, but they bore witness to the very heart of the gospel when they recognized Jesus as one who is the *friend* of sinners and outsiders, and proves it by sitting down at the table to *eat* with them.

So as we come to eat and drink at the Lord’s table today, let us hear the gospel according to the Pharisees.

My Friend

Who is Christ and the God who comes to us in him? Everyone of us who knows himself or herself to be a sinner in one way or another can say without hesitation or qualification, “He is *my* friend, and he promises to come to *me* as I eat and drink today.”

Do you sometimes feel that you have no right to come to the Lord’s Supper because your faith is not strong enough or sure enough? Because your life is not “spiritual” enough? Because you talk a lot about feeding the hungry, caring for the homeless, and defending the cause of the poor and oppressed—but don’t actually do very much about it?

During the celebration of the Supper do you sometimes feel only the absence of God just when you know it is here above all that you are supposed to feel God’s presence?

Do you sometimes feel like an outsider because you don’t feel much of anything—neither the overwhelming sense of your sinfulness nor the great spiritual high you are supposed to feel?

Does your mind sometimes wander when you are supposed to be deep in prayer?

Do you catch yourself looking at your watch and wondering how long it will take to get everyone served so that you can get away and beat the Baptists to the cafeteria?

Then hear this: The Lord’s Supper is just for people like you. You do not have to do anything, be anything, feel anything to make yourself spiritually, psychologically, or morally worthy to come to the table. You don’t even have to make yourself worthy by telling yourself how unworthy you are. The host is not the friend of those who are already good and faithful, pious and obedient. He is the friend of just such sinners and outsiders as you know yourself to be.

So if your faith is weak and your doubts are strong; if your motives are questionable and your spirituality leaves something to be desired; if your life will not stand careful examination—come to the table. You may be surprised to discover as you eat and drink that it is not so much how we come to Christ as how Christ comes to us that makes the reconciling and renewing presence of God real in our lives.

Our Friend

But that is not all. Each of us needs to remind himself or herself that Jesus is not just my friend; he is also the friend of all those other sinners and outsiders who come to the table with me.

He is also the friend of fellow Christians whose theology seems too liberal or too conservative to me, whose Christian experience and faith and life are so different from mine that I wonder whether they are really Christians at all.

He is the friend of those who offend me because they are too pious or not pious enough, too right wing or too left wing in their political views, too sexist and racist or too quick to accuse others of sexism and racism.

He is the friend of all those around me whom I just plain don't like, would never invite to dinner in my own house, and with whom I would just as soon not have to eat and drink in such intimate fellowship in the church.

Jesus is their friend too. I cannot eat and drink in *his* company without eating and drinking in their company too. If he is not too good to associate with them, I cannot be too good to associate with them either.

That does not mean that I have to agree with everything they say and approve of everything they do. But if Jesus is their friend, I can be their friend too.

What a surprise it would be if we discovered at this table that we are reconciled to each other as we eat and drink in the company of the one who is the friend of all us sinners.

Everybody's Friend

But even that is not all. Jesus and the God who comes to us in him is not only my friend and the friend of others who come with me to the table today. He is the friend of sinners and outsiders everywhere: Sinners who are believers and sinners who are unbelievers. Christian sinners and Jewish and Muslim sinners. Straight and gay sinners. Right-wing and left-wing sinners. Sinners who are oppressors and sinners who are the oppressed. Red, yellow, black, and white sinners.

We do not know who Jesus is and it is not his table we come to if we do not come recognizing his friendship for all those other sinners too. We cannot eat and drink with him if we do not eat and drink in eager anticipation of the great feast when all kinds of sinners from East and West, North and South, all over the world, will sit together at the table in the kingdom of God.

That does not mean that we can ignore or accept all the sinfulness in the world that causes so much suffering and injustice. But it does mean that when we speak up and take our stand against sinful individuals and groups, we can never do it to humiliate, get even, pay back, defeat, and wipe out. We can only do it so that they too may be healed, restored, helped, included, and find their own true humanity in reconciliation with God and their fellow human beings.

If Jesus is the friend of all those sinners out there in the world; if he lived, died, rose again and rules over all things for them too—then we can be their friends also.

What a surprise it would be if we were to discover that not just our reconciliation but the reconciliation of the whole world begins to happen as Christians gather at the table of the Lord whom they confess to be not just *their* friend but the friend of sinners and outsiders everywhere.

Invitation

So come to the table, however unworthy you know yourself to be. Jesus is your friend.

Come gladly with others in our community, however unworthy you suspect some of them are. Jesus is their friend too.

Come with prayers for a sinful world. There is no one, anywhere, with whom the crucified and risen Jesus does not want to be friends.

Come and eat and drink so that we may enjoy the forgiveness and renewal his friendship brings to us and our little community, and so that we may be nourished and strengthened to be ambassadors of his reconciling, renewing friendliness toward a sinful and suffering world.

Prayer after Communion

Gracious God, giver of the bread of life, you have fed us. Now before we go, we pray for our hungry world.

We pray for all who are hungry for food to fill their empty bellies.

We pray for men, women, and especially children who are hungry for someone to understand and love and care for them, hungry for someone to love in return.

We pray for all who have caused or allowed suffering in the lives of others, and are hungry for forgiveness.

We pray for all who have messed up their own lives and hunger for a chance to make a new beginning.

We pray for those who are forgotten, excluded or oppressed, and hunger for justice.

We pray for all who have lost their way, don't know what to do or which way to turn, and hunger for guidance and help.

You give us the bread of life not just so that we may have everything we need but so that we may participate in your life-giving, reconciling, hope-bringing work among all people, everywhere. Help us now to go out to share what we have received.