

No Sin, No Service

Matthew 9:9-13

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As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Have you ever noticed that at the restaurant you least want to eat at, the restaurant that looks the most unappealing and certainly the least elegant is always that restaurant that has the sign, "No shirt, no shoes, no service." I find myself wondering, has this been a problem for them in the past? Do people walk into these places and realize, "Oh no, I forgot my shirt. And my shoes too." Is it a community wide issue, or is there one particular customer who keeps forgetting, and the sign is just for him? In that case, it should say, "Jared, no shirt, no shoes, no service," so the rest don't get wacky ideas. When I'm in a restaurant like that, I am tempted to take my shoes off, just to see what they'd do. Or then I think, are shoes and shirts the only deal breakers here? What about pants? But I've thought it through, and I suppose what they are trying to say with that sign is that although this is a casual place, there are limits. We don't just serve anybody. You have to have clothing on. Or at least two items of clothing. Well, at least they put it out there. Most of society is not that honest. Groups of people have those signs in their heads, but outsiders never see those signs.

So the new junior employee sits down at the cafeteria table and is horrified to discover he has plunked himself in the middle of senior management. Or a single man sits next to a beautiful woman only to be displaced by her husband for whom she was saving the seat, and he leaves embarrassed. Or a newcomer to the church sits in someone else's regular seat and can tell from a look that something is wrong, but what is it?

Or picture this moment. You enter the school cafeteria and freeze. You clutch your lunch and wonder. Where do I sit? Will I be welcomed? Will I be ignored? This is the worst moment, but you will get through it. You will get through it because you have been the new kid before. Every couple of years, in fact, you have gone to a new school and faced this hideous moment. But the noise from the lunch room hits you like a bomb. All that chattering, shrieking, and laughing does not include you, and it never has. You are the outsider. You have no-where to sit. You could turn around and spend the lunch hour in the bathroom, but then tomorrow you will have to deal with this again. "Is someone sitting here?" you ask at a table with an empty seat or two. A shrug. "Go ahead."

You remember your last school, where, when you asked "Is someone sitting

here?" they said "Sorry, it's taken." So you sat somewhere else and then spent the lunch hour looking at that still empty seat and the girls around it whispering to one another, saying "That was mean," when their laughter indicated what it really was to them was funny to them. After that, you wondered if you would always eat alone at this school. And now, sitting here, doing this moment one more time, you sit down and wonder: Will they talk to me? Will I ever eat with these people again?

"What's your name?" the girl I have joined at the table asks me. Another says, "Where did you move from?" And at her question, my heart fills with such gratitude; I fight to keep back the tears. They have welcomed me. I have a place to sit. I will not have to eat alone in the middle of a crowded room. This was a scenario I went through every couple of years in my childhood, moving as we did from one place to another, a journalist's family, a foreign correspondent, never staying in any one country very long. That internal first day in the lunch room dialogue, I have it memorized and can recall it as if it were yesterday.

The desire to eat at the table with others seems to have been hardwired into human beings. And now let me ask you a hard question. Do you ever eat alone with the television on? I always read in health magazines that you shouldn't do that. Apparently, you should practice mindful eating, quietly savoring every morsel in solitude. You get your remote in one hand and fork in the other, and channel surf your way through a wolfed down meal, wishing you were eating the pizza they are advertising on TV, and therefore eating twice as much of whatever you have in front of you. Why do we do that? Why, in the privacy of our own homes, do we watch TV when we eat? Because when we're eating alone, it can feel lonely. We turn on the television for company. We like eating in the company of others.

We can't always pull it off today, but as human beings, we have always done it sometimes, gathered as groups to eat together, clearly enjoying it. Early art depicts it. The last supper clinched it. Eating at the table together has the capacity to be both very ordinary and earth shattering. In the communion liturgy from Luke's gospel, we hear: "Their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread." God was in action when they gathered at the table. None of that would have happened had the disciples each been eating alone.

But there is a social status element to all this as well. It is not just that we do not want to eat alone. We do not want to be seen as eating alone. Whether it is the wedding banquet seating arrangement or walking into the corporate cafeteria, we notice who eats with whom. Where does your boss eat? Which groups of coworkers are clustered together? Do the union members sit on one side of the break room, the supervisor on the other? From our earliest nursery school memories of snack time to the seating chart at the retirement dinner, we know that these seating arrangements, formal and informal, mean something about who we are and where we are placed. And it says something about our society.

Let me give you an example from a certain local junior high school in our community. Those who set the rules for the school are aware of the social jockeying that takes place over where pre-teenagers eat, so they have come up with a solution. It is one of those heavy-handed solutions that kills the gnat with the baseball bat, and ends up damaging the table. When my son started at this school in the sixth grade, I

found out to my horror that the students had no choice about where they sat. Lunch time seating was assigned. By the Pharisees. Now, the kids have some say in it. They let you choose where to sit at the beginning of the year, but from then on it was set. You had to sit with those people from that time on. It was an effort to reduce the chaos of the junior high lunchroom (well, good luck with that), but also an effort to make sure everyone had someone to sit with, that no one would be left out or excluded.

But how did the baseball bat kill the gnat and still damage the table? I'll tell you. Those early teen years are some of the most cliquish times when good kids can be awfully hard on one another. You must remember those years yourself, when those social lines between groups are almost calcified. So what a message to send during that developmental period. You are stuck in one social group. You can not grow; you can not change. Your social rut is set, and you are stuck in it, from the first week of school on. It may seem minor, but that's a damaged social table, and it sets the stage for social stratification in adult life.

If Jesus had been a student in this school, he would not have been allowed to eat with the tax collectors and sinners. And you know you have sinners in junior high school. There would have been no opportunity for their redemption. But I have a feeling that if Jesus had gone to Hadley Junior High, he would have broken that rule. For in his life, when he ate with the tax collectors and the sinners, he was breaking rules that were more rigid than that.

In Jesus' day, who you ate with mattered. Where you sat was not a casual affair. You were associated with the people you ate with. If they were good upstanding people and they invited you to eat at their table, you were, by association, good and upstanding too. Add to this social pressure, the fact that there were dietary laws that good observant Jews followed, and those who did not follow them were considered unclean. So eating with the wrong people who were not careful about such observances would make you dirty by association. Even worse, if people were sinners, known to the community as such, you definitely didn't want to eat with them. The only people who ate with the sinners were the other sinners, the people who had to share a table because no other table would have them.

So people kept track of these things. In Jesus' day, they weren't all eating in a school cafeteria; they were observing one another in small town life. They kept track of who went into whose house, and who stayed for dinner, and who was invited, and who was not invited. Everybody watched, and while there wasn't a sign hanging over the various dining room tables, you knew who would be served and who would not.

By the time I got to high school, in the suburbs of Washington, DC, the last school I would attend before college, I had already been to nine other schools in seven different countries. So I knew how to read the lunchroom tables like an anthropologist. Technically, you were free to sit anywhere you liked, but not really. There were the orchestra kids, the ethnic and cultural groupings, the loud kids, the quiet kids. One table featured a group that you never saw in any class, because they only seemed to be present in school for lunch. There was another table that apparently you could only eat at if you were pretty. There was no sign posted, but there may as well have been. Only the handsome can sit here. The nerds hung together, talking about things the people at that previous table would not have been able to understand anyway. And then there was the back table, where any type of food could be turned into an aviation device, and

weapons were crafted from straws, ketchup packets and tater tots – those amazing tiny fried potatoes that can also function as missiles. You remember this table from your school days. That’s where I ended up, I must confess. The back table. Why? Because back when I was the new kid, they welcomed me.

But high school was the first place in my life where I actually got to start and graduate in one school, and so something remarkable happened over those three consecutive years. The lunch room ceased to be a place of terror and instead became for me a wonderful social buffet. And I decided not be restricted to any one food group. I decided to cross pollinate the lunch tables. At first, when I would sit down at any of the afore mentioned enclaves, I was stared at as if I had made a mistake. But gradually I got to know different people, make different friends, and I realized that the cliques were not nearly as homogenous as I had been led to believe. There were smart students at the pretty table, and jocks at the orchestra table, and interesting stories everywhere. I admit it, I was practicing lunch table infidelity, and, like many forbidden things, it was fun.

One day at the nerd table, a guy who had seen me at the back table over the years said, “You know, Lillian, you’re a lot less of a loser than you seemed to be.”

I sympathized. “Yeah, you throw one tater tot and people think you’re a moron.”

“Well, you actually threw a lot of tater tots,” he replied.

“Whatever. Dude, we’ve got to break down these walls.” It was a moment.

When Jesus was fishing for disciples, he was looking in some pretty shallow pools. These were not necessarily the best and the brightest. Not those voted most likely to succeed. At one point, he appears so desperate that the scripture tells us “he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And the tax collector got up from his booth and followed him.” Now, tax collectors were the most hated group in the social system, not to be confused with governmental officials today or the IRS. While we may not always enjoy paying our taxes, we hardly blame the guy who reads our tax returns, right? But these New Testament tax collectors had sold out the Jewish people to the empire, ratted out their own kind, extorting money for a bully just to pay their own bills. If there was anyone you could judge, it was a tax collector.

And as Jesus sat at dinner* in the house, then all sorts of other tax-collectors and sinners came and joined them. Because they had become a table with a culture. Not the nerd table, not the jock table, but the sinners table, the rejects, the people no one else wanted to eat with. And there were Jesus and his disciples not just eating with them, but recruiting leaders from within their ranks. The Pharisees, who were good and observant Jews, the ones who were most careful about the rules, saw this, and said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?” Why isn’t he sitting at his assigned table?” Because they were honestly baffled at this rule breaking. They were genuinely worried that Jesus was making himself unclean. And he was, without apology.

“No shirt, no shoes, no service.” Most of the world isn’t that direct. But the unspoken and unwritten rules are often the ones that cause the most pain. Jesus turned the tables on that by sitting at the wrong table. What made it the wrong table? The wrong people were sitting at it. Who are the wrong people? The ones who are not like us.

At our church, we house the homeless every Sunday night for twelve months of the year, right downstairs. Even though we live in an affluent suburb, our church hall

is filled to capacity with about 60 men, women and children in search of shelter. But in making a change this summer, to move from doing this seven months of the year to doing it year round, we have received some feedback from the community. There are concerns, because in the hours before and after the housing program, these homeless guests do not really have anywhere to go. So they frequent the Starbucks, and some of them panhandle. Others push their carts filled with their belongings around town, biding the time before the doors are opened for dinner or closed after breakfast. In other words, say these critics, by wandering around a town they could never afford a home in, they do not respect the assigned seating arrangements.

In fact, some of the complaints I have heard center around the fact that the homeless have the nerve to sit on the bench outside the coffee shop, and by doing so, prevent others from sitting there. Who would not want to sit by someone like that? It is as if, in this affluent suburb, there is an unspoken sign that says that if you pay enough money for your home, you should not only not have to sit next a homeless person, but you should not even have to see one. This attitude is not everywhere in town. In fact, I think it is a minority opinion, and it is clearly not shared by the members of our church, as our commitment indicates. But you know that attitude pervades much of privileged culture.

Jesus has a very clear answer that will not satisfy these people. The answer is this. In the world, there may be assigned seating, but in the kingdom of heaven there is not. So throw out the seating chart, in church as well as on the park benches, and remember that the church was born on the damaged consciences and rotten reputations of tax collectors, sinners and people in need. They were our founders. Matthew, who today some people would want to remove from a public picnic table, has a gospel written in his name that we read this Sunday.

The church will always be criticized when it challenges the world on these issues. We will always be told that the barriers are there for a reason, that the rules are there to keep order, and that if we can all keep to our own lunch tables, we will all be better off. And the myth of that story is that you could keep all the sinners at their own table. Which is of course wrong and also profoundly self-deceiving. Because there are sinners at every table. You can argue with that. But I can say this for sure, there's a sinner at every table I sit down at, because it's me.

Often, we read this gospel passage in church as a cautionary tale. Do not be like those Pharisees, who exclude and divide. It's a decent lesson to take away, but it's a lesson that puts us in the position of power and decision making, where we think we belong. That's too easy. Instead today, try understanding this story like you're the tax collector. You're looking over the tables, wondering where you can sit down and who will have you. You want a way out of your past mistakes and your sins. You want to live better. And there you see a man who sits with sinners, you, me, and the tax collector, and if there had been a sign above that table, it would have said, "No sin, no service." In other words, you need to be a sinner to eat at this restaurant. Which is just another way of saying, everyone is welcome here at the communion table, and on the beds in our church hall, or in the public spaces in our town. In the kingdom of heaven there is no assigned seating. So let's not put up with it here on earth.