

October 6, 2019

The Good News of Forgiveness

Luke 5:27-32

If you have ever been involved in planning a wedding, you know how tricky it is to figure out who you have to invite, who you can get away with not inviting, who would be OK to sit by who, who must not sit with who, etc. There are protocols that must be observed. There are times when a meal is more than just a meal ... the meal is deeply symbolic of who's included, who's important (who gets to sit at the head table), and who's not.

In Jesus' day, virtually every meal was symbolic (imagine the stress). You could only invite people from your own social class; they were expected to return the favour by inviting you over. Jews ate with Jews. Romans ate with Romans. Wealthy ate with wealthy. Poor with poor. You knew who was in; you knew who was out.

The Pharisees, a lobby-group dedicated to improving the "religious-ness" of Jewish people by observing every microbe of the law, insisted they – and anyone else who wanted to be "in" – must eat according to strict purity laws (that went far beyond the Bible). They would never eat with non-Pharisees, because such people did not follow the same elaborate purity rules; their food would be tainted. Besides, what self-respecting religious person would want to be seen eating with "sinners." Someone might think you were guilty, by association. Pharisees knew exactly who was in and out.

Jesus messes with our preconceptions of who's in and who's out – who's good and who's not-so-good, who's healthy and sick. He asks us to think about who we are in this story. And what implications that has for how we live our lives. Who we are matters.

1. Who does Jesus eat with?

Jesus is at a party. It wouldn't be so bad if it were a party of the who's who of Israel or a party with "good" religious folk, like Pharisees. But this is a party of rough types: tax collectors and sinners. I don't suppose tax collectors have ever been popular; in Jesus' day they were despised. They were traitors, Jewish people working for the Romans. They gouged rich and poor alike by charging exorbitant "service fees." Tax collectors were outcasts, "unclean." Respectable folk would have nothing to do with them. You certainly wouldn't eat with them. That would suggest that you were as bad as them ... or they were as good as you ... heaven forbid.

When Levi throws his party it's not surprising most of the guests are other tax collectors – respectable people had nothing to do with him. The Pharisees (also not surprising) are not impressed Jesus is eating with such people. They complain to Jesus' disciples (they would never actually go into Levi's house; someone might get the wrong idea). Imagine Jesus coming outside for a breath of fresh air and hearing the Pharisees grumbling. Jesus doesn't deal with issues of "pure" versus "impure" ... He doesn't deal with matters of etiquette and propriety. His response echoes his initial mission statement (Luke 4:18-

19): *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Luke 5:31-32).

2. Who are "the healthy"?

The Pharisees? Yes. They take their faith in God seriously. Jesus respects them as genuinely spiritual people.

How about us? Probably yes. Most of us take our faith in God seriously.

However Jesus will remind the Pharisees that healthy spirituality is more than just doing the right things. It is possible to do all the right religious things for all the wrong reasons. You can be "religious" to try to earn your way to heaven. You can be doctrinally pure and morally correct to curry God's favour. But a religiosity that flows out of legalism, Jesus argues, is fundamentally unhealthy and toxic to oneself and others. It can become judgmental, joyless, legalistic, and stifling.

For Jesus, however, healthy spirituality flows as a love offering back to God, as a loving response to God's gift of life, love and forgiveness. We choose to live in God honouring, generous, gracious, ethical, just ways, as an outflow of our gratitude for our salvation. We live godly lives out of relationship with God, not to bribe Him to like us

God offers us forgiveness, eternal life – just because He loves His creation. He invites us to be His children – just because He loves His creation. We don't earn it. We don't work hard to get it. It is God's gift of grace.

And in a healthy spirituality, out of a response to God's amazing love and grace, we worship Him by offering our lives back to him, *"give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you"* (Romans 12:1). Our worship is our loving response God's love. . Offered out of love, our spirituality is life-giving, joyful, and expansive.

We sometimes think of worship in terms of the pastor and worship leaders as performers with the congregation as audience (we aren't sure where God fits in; maybe He's the conductor). In truth, God is the audience. The pastor and worship leaders are conductors. And all of us, together, are performers ... we are all offering ourselves and our thanks to God, through worship. It's good to remember what we think of a sermon, a song, a prayer – whether we like it or not – really doesn't matter. What God thinks of it does matter. It is offered to God as our spiritual worship. It is for His glory, not ours.

3. Who are "the sick"?

On one hand, the Pharisees are "the healthy." Well, they think they're healthy. And they are pretty sure who's sick – the tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus will go on, time and time again, to show them they aren't as healthy as they think they are, caught up in their own obsessiveness, self-righteousness, pride, judgment, and legalism.

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

Who's healthy? Who's sick? Jesus point is the healthy one is the one who realizes he has a problem, who believes God can help them, and who turns their life over to the care of God. The sick ones are those who think they are totally healthy. Who are confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.

On another occasion, *"The tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* (Luke 15:1-2) What does Jesus do? He tells a parable about a son who insults his father, runs away, squanders his inheritance, and ends up in desperate straits. The prodigal then humbles himself, comes to the father in repentance and confession, saying, *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* Who does the prodigal represent? The sick – tax collectors and sinners. What happens? The Father welcomes him home with open arms. Thanks to the father's grace and love, the sick son is made whole and healthy.

Remember the older brother – who did everything perfectly all his life, who mutters and grumbles? On the one hand he behaves rightly, on the other hand, he is bitter, judgmental, unforgiving, and unloving. He thinks he is healthy, but his heart betrays a fundamental sickness. Who does the older brother represent? The Pharisees. Religious people ... who are bitter, judgmental, unloving, and ungracious.

Jesus' point? – the amazing love of the Father. He welcomes the sick as well as the healthy, the sinners as well as the saints. Jesus wants us always to remember the amazing, amazing love of the Father. And to remember that we're all a little bit sick (even if our sickness is as subtle as spiritual pride, thinking we're OK); we all need God's grace and forgiveness.

4. The Good News of Forgiveness

This morning we want to celebrate the Good News of God's forgiveness. *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

"Since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly

save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God." (Romans 5:6-11).

This promise is true for us whether we are as "bad" as tax collectors and sinners or as "good" as Pharisees. None of us is perfect. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. In the words of Soviet dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *"If only there were evil people somewhere clearly committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."* We all need the Good News of God's forgiveness.

There ought to be a certain humility that comes with this realization. We are all in this messy thing called "life" together. We are all fellow strugglers, wrestling with the good and not so good parts within ourselves. We struggle with different sins:

- Some might be obvious sins of the tax collectors and sinners: robbery, cruelty, lies, sexual sins
- Some might be the less obvious sins of the Pharisees: judgmentalism, self-righteousness, and pride
- Some are sins of commission: things we do or say we know are wrong. Like the tax collectors.
- Some are sins of omission: this we should do or say that we don't do or say – providing practical help or speaking words of encouragement? Like the Pharisees.
- Some are one-off sins
- Some are habitual sins

We all come before the cross of Jesus on an equal footing. *"Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged."*

"And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye"(Matthew 7:1-5).

This is a good time to come before God in humility – not pointing fingers, not in judgment, not in a sense of self-righteousness. But with confession and repentance. And with a deep sense of thanksgiving that Jesus loves to spend time with the tax collectors and sinners of the world – people just like me.