

Sinners & “Saints”

Luke 5:27-32

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 18 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁷ After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” ²⁸ And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

²⁹ Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰ The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹ Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:27-32, NRSV)

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Our passage today begins by looking backwards. “After this...” is telling us to keep in mind what has just occurred as we go forward. So as a reminder, Jesus has just healed the paralyzed man brought to him by four other men who had such faith that Jesus could make him walk again they bust through the roof of the house where Jesus is teaching to get the man an audience with Jesus. But Jesus didn’t just heal the man’s body. Remember? Jesus also healed his soul by declaring to him and all those standing around that his sins were forgiven. Well, the religious leaders standing around could not believe what they heard. **“Who does he think he is? That’s blasphemous talk! God and God alone can forgive sins.”**¹ Surely this man can’t be God. But then immediately Jesus turns and heals the paralyzed man who, after years of immobility, stands up, picks up his stretcher, and goes home.

At the very least the religious leaders, and the crowd with them, have to be confused as they leave the house to go outside. Could there be something to this carpenter from Nazareth? Is it possible that he really is from God, maybe even the Messiah himself? Who else could claim to forgive sins? Who else could heal in such miraculous ways? Maybe he’s legitimate after all. But then *this* happens.

“After this [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” There is that moment when all

your questions, all your wonderings, all the possibilities become crystal clear, that moment when you thought what might possibly have been true turns out to be nothing at all. God forgives, yes. God heals, yes. But there is absolutely no way on earth that God makes friends with tax collectors. It’s a deal breaker.

Levi, who later became Matthew, was a tax collector. Israel was an occupied province of Rome in those days and Rome levied taxes on their subjects as a way to finance the heavy toll of administering the Empire. There were income taxes, export taxes, taxes on crops, taxes on travel, taxes on taxes! How it worked was Rome would hire out wealthy foreigners to oversee the taxes in each region and these foreigners would, in turn, hire local inhabitants to actually collect those taxes. In Israel, certain Jews bid for the right to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. On top of that, these tax collectors were allowed to collect extra as a way to make a profit, creating a system that was rife with theft, fraud and corruption. Basically, this was extortion, and the tax collectors as a result became incredibly wealthy. As you can imagine, they also became incredibly despised, not only because they were traitors cheating their own people to help the enemy but because it was believed that their excessive contact with Gentiles made them spiritually unclean.

It’s interesting to note that when Levi throws a party most of his guests are fellow tax collectors. They were probably his only friends. He and others like him would have been total outcasts in their community, not even allowed to enter the synagogue to worship. In the eyes of everybody those days, Levi was – listen carefully here – *beyond the boundary of those with whom God associated*. There’s a good chance that even Levi had come to accept that God wanted nothing to do with him.

But then here is Jesus, the one they were beginning to say just be the Messiah, coming up to this tax collector, *while he is right in the middle of the very act of collecting taxes*, and he invites Levi to follow him as his disciple. It’s not as if Levi is a former extortionist, now rehabilitated. He’s in the very act of extortion when Jesus calls him! Do not underestimate the absolute shock of everybody in that place who witnessed this interaction. And as a result, at least two things happen.

First, Levi says yes. We are told that immediately **“he got up, left everything, and followed [Jesus].”** It

¹ Luke 5:21, *The Message*

brings us back to the story we looked at a few weeks ago when Peter and his fishing buddies left their boats and their nets on the shore and followed after Jesus. Except this is even more impressive. If things didn't work out for Peter he could always go back to fishing. Not Levi. The moment he abandoned his tax booth mid-shift is the moment he walked away from being a tax collector for good. There is no way he would be trusted with that job again. He burned that bridge to the ground. It's truly a heroic step of faith that he takes here. He's all in.

Why? It's got to be joy. This was likely a man convinced, and maybe rightly so, that he has traded friendship with God for a life of selfish greed, but now he is suddenly confronted with the possibility that even though his religious community has cut him off perhaps his God has not. And he is so overjoyed he does the natural thing; he throws a party. And not just a quaint little get-together, a BBQ in the backyard. No! This is a great feast at which he spares no expense. It's a reminder that this is a very wealthy man, but he is now using his great wealth to honor Jesus. Did you notice? Jesus isn't just a guest at the party, but the party itself is thrown *in his honor!*

And who are the guests? Everybody else there is an outsider. Many are other tax collectors. The others are referred to later on by the Pharisees and scribes as simply "sinners". The use of this word indicated that the religious leaders weren't just offering their personal opinion. No, these were individuals whose offenses against that Mosaic Law were well known by everybody and they had been either informally or formally convicted of their transgressions. Like the tax collectors, they had been excluded from the synagogue which was, in those days, central to life in the community.²

What we have here is probably all the outsiders in town. Everybody Levi knows is there. These are all his friends in low places. And I would suggest to you that one of the indications of Levi's joy in being overwhelmed by the inclusive grace of Christ is the fact that he can't wait to share what he has found with everybody he knows! If a man like him can be friends with God, then maybe everybody can be friends with God. As the great Anglican bishop J.C. Ryle once put it, "A converted man will not want to go to heaven alone." When you are a starving beggar who suddenly finds a feast of bread enough for a multitude, the first thing you do, if you have any love at all for your fellow beggars, is that you go and tell them what you have

found so that they can come and feast as well. And I would suggest to you that one of the marks of a Christian who truly understands that in salvation he or she has been given a pure gift of grace that is completely unmerited, is that person will be eager to share this good news with others around them.

In addition to Levi's response of joy, however, there is another response to Jesus' actions. The religious leaders standing by watching all this unfold are beside themselves. Immediately they go to Jesus' disciples and complain, "**Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?**" This is over the top! Not only has Jesus called one of these vermin to be his follower, but now he's partying it up with a houseful of them!

Here's the problem. Table customs in those days were anything but casual. *What* you ate was important, but *who* you ate with was just as important. An ancient Near Eastern proverb puts it this way, "I saw them eating and knew who they were." If you eat with godly people you are a godly person yourself. If you eat with sinners, with those rejected by God, then you also are a sinner who is rejected by God.

In some ways we still carry on these customs. Who you choose to share meals with tells other people a great deal about who you are. Many of us work every day with at least some people we don't like all that much. But when it's time for your lunchbreak, you choose to walk over to Subway with the ones you do like. In school we sit in class next to all sorts of people; we've got no choice. But in the cafeteria we are much more selective about who we share a table with. It's a necessity of life in society that we have to rub shoulders with all kinds of people but there is something about meals, something very intimate and relational about breaking bread together, that leads us to restrict our tables to those like us. It's been this way for a very long time.

How could Jesus choose to eat and drink with these people? It tells us everything we need to know about him. It was irrefutable evidence that this man could not be from God. You see, these Pharisees and scribes were the 'saints' of their day. They knew, like everybody else knew, that they were favored by God. They had the right pedigree, the right race, the right religion, the right morality, and kept the right company around the dinner table. Yes, for a moment they may have wondered if Jesus might possibly be among their number. He forgives sin and works miracles. Maybe he is also favored by God. But now he has gone and made friends with *those* people, and if you associate yourself with *those* people, with those who are clearly outside of

² Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 77.

the favor of God then you have placed *yourself* outside the favor of God.

This was no small thing. In fact, Jesus' habit of choosing these sorts of table companions – he did this over and over again, you know – was one of the main reasons that the religious leaders of his day ultimately decided that they wanted him dead. It was simply too much of a threat to all that they stood for. Their status before God depended on the boundaries which had been established and messing with those boundaries threatened that very status.

And it is here where we are drawn into the story. Spectators to this point, Luke is now forcing us to choose sides, and there are two choices before us. Are we going to stand with the sinners or stand with the 'saints'? I know that most of you think the choice is easy, but it's not as easy as you might think. And if you're willing to pay attention here and be straight-up honest, you'll see what I mean.

First there are the sinners, for whom Levi is the poster boy. Now, if we choose to stand with Levi we stand in a humble place. Remember the parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the tax collector who both go to the temple one day to pray? The Pharisee stands proudly in front and uses his prayer to thank God that he is such a fine, upstanding citizen. He even recites all the good deeds he has done just in case God hasn't noticed. He certainly is not at all like that sinful tax collector who shouldn't even be here in the first place. The tax collector, however, knew he shouldn't be there so he stands at a distance, far off in the back. When he prays he can't even look up to heaven but beats his chest as he cries out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus ends the parable by saying that it was the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, who went home justified that day before God.³

To stand with Levi, therefore, is to come to grips with the fact that there truly is nothing in us that merits God's favor and salvation. If God treats us as we deserve to be treated he will never share a table with us, much less welcome us around his table. If we can realize this to the point that all that is left to do is cry out for God's mercy, then we will be surprised to realize that he welcomes us anyway, that grace and love are all he has for us. Then we, like Levi, will be overcome with joy, at once willing to give everything we have to God and to share this extraordinary good news with whoever is willing to hear it because we believe that if God has accepted us then everybody else must be

accepted as well! That's what it means to stand with the sinners.

To stand with the 'saints', however, is to convince ourselves that there is something in us, something about us, that makes us more worthy before God than others. We may not compare ourselves to tax collectors these days – we tend not to hate those among us who work for the IRS – but there are others who, because of who they are, or what they believe, or how they have lived their lives, who we can convince ourselves are simply not the sorts of people Jesus would befriend in the way he befriends us. That's what it means to stand with the 'saints'.

So the choice is easy, right? Especially for us because here in Northern California we live in what might just be the most progressive, tolerant, inclusive culture in the history of the world. My children have grown up here and there has not been a single year in school when they have been a part of the racial majority in any class or any school because there is no racial majority in the schools they have attended. Every table in the lunchroom of their schools looks like a miniature version of the United Nations and most of our kids, I believe, think nothing of it, which is a beautiful thing. Does racism still exist in our city? Of course it does, more than we realize. White privilege is still a reality, even here in Sacramento, and if you don't believe me I would love to introduce you to people who will convince you that they actually have been consistently treated unfairly because of the color of their skin.

Furthermore, whatever your views on marriage and sexual morality, our society is becoming increasingly tolerant towards people of various sexual orientations, even though homophobia is still distressingly prevalent. Unlike in many places in our world, and even in our own nation, people in our city of different religious traditions are free to worship as they please though I know religious discrimination, even here in Sacramento, is not extinct.

Here's my point. Please don't miss it. Most of us in this room would not be shocked to discover Jesus sharing a table with somebody who was a different race from us, or somebody who was of a different sexual-orientation from us, or even somebody who was in a different religion from us. Those are not boundaries most of us tend to draw anymore. Jesus, of course, may not affirm that everything his Buddhist friend believes. How could he? Buddhists don't even believe there is a God. But would that keep Jesus from having lunch with him? From loving him? Most of us would say it would not. And so we also find ourselves, many of us, regularly sharing tables with people who are different

³ See Luke 18:9-14

from us in all these different ways, associating ourselves naturally with all sorts of people. Who here would refuse to have lunch with somebody simply because they were of a different race, or sexual orientation, or religion, or even because they had a checkered past?

But here's the danger. The progressive inclusivity of our culture can easily trick us into believing that we would never stand with the 'saints' in this story. That's not us. We don't draw those sorts of boundaries anymore. But the problem is that we often have failed to consider other sorts of boundaries we may still like to draw.

Let's be honest about this. What about the guy at the Trump rally with the "Make American Great Again" ball cap and the t-shirt that reads "Build the Wall"? Do you want to have lunch with that guy? Do you want him to identify, ball cap and all, as your friend on Facebook? Or what about the woman who has these bumper stickers plastered on her car? "Against Abortion? Don't have one!" Or, "I'm still with Her". Or, "Darwin Loves You". Would you invite her over for dinner and be happy to have her park her car in your driveway for all your neighbors to see what sort of people you choose to associate with? Would it surprise you to come across Jesus enjoying dinner with Donald Trump and Steve Bannon? Would you be shocked to see Jesus laughing it up over lunch with Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi?

Maybe not. Maybe your boundaries aren't political. Though in this political climate I have to tell you that I regularly hear Christians, especially on social media, treating those on the other side as modern day "tax collectors". But maybe your boundaries aren't political. So what would be your reaction if you found out that Jesus was the guest of honor at a party full of pedophiles and wife beaters, people who had been publicly convicted for some of the most heinous crimes we never want to imagine? And there's Jesus, right there around the table, sharing a feast with these people. Or maybe the table is full of white supremacists just come from another hate-filled rally, or religious terrorists with a history of violence against those who don't share their race or creed, or some other group of modern day tax collectors you, if you're honest, can't imagine as the sorts of people Jesus calls his friends.

I don't know what your boundaries are. I know what mine are. I can't deny the fact that at times I have allowed my heart to harden towards certain people, or certain groups of people, who are unlike me in ways that make me imagine I am more favored by God than they are. And if you're honest, as I really hope you will be honest, there may also be people in this world you

would never want to have lunch with and you've convinced yourself that Jesus has got your back in that decision.

So now let me ask you again. Who do you stand with, the sinners or the 'saints'? It's not a stupid question is it? Isn't there something in all of us that kind of wants to stand with the 'saints'? Jesus knows there is. It's why this story is in here, to confront us with the truth so that we might be set free. His words at the end are words he speaks to us, "**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.**" Imagine a doctor who didn't want to associate with sick people. That's not a doctor. Imagine a savior who came only looking for people who were worthy. That's not a savior.

Don't misunderstand me. Jesus is not condoning sinful behavior here. Levi and his friends were wicked people. It was horrendous the way they had treated others for personal gain. These people were traitors and extortionists, truly terrible people. And Jesus is clear that he is calling them to repentance, to change the way they think so that they can change the way they live. There is nothing in this sermon that is meant to justify sin because Jesus never justifies sin. But he does justify sinners! Repentance is not for the respectable or the self-righteous, but for those who know they are terminally sick with sin, people like Levi and his party guests.

I hope you see Jesus' sarcasm here. Sure, people who are well don't need a doctor but, in Jesus' view, nobody is well. The problem is that lots of people think they are. But those who know they are sick, who know that there is nothing in them that can merit God's favor, that they are literally no more righteous than anybody else, they are in luck because Christ came offering grace. As he said at another point, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who are at the end of their rope and know it, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**"⁴ The problem with the 'saints' is that they don't realize they are sinners right along with the worst of them. If they did, of course, if they could only humble themselves enough to realize they were sinners, they then would become actual saints.

Here is what this means for us. The church is a community of Jesus' followers gathered around his Table. This Table is central in our place of worship, as it is central in almost all places of Christian worship, because it is meant to be a reminder to us every time we gather that though we are sinners every one of us, we

⁴ Paraphrase of Matthew 5:3.

have been invited as friends of Jesus to eat and drink with him and share his life with him. It's all grace. But it's not just grace for some of us but for all of us. Everybody who realizes they are sick is welcome to come find a seat around this table. *Everybody!* As somebody once put it, "The church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate."⁵ I love that!

This has always been the way of the church when the church is reflecting its Master. In the early church, table invitations in the homes of those first Christians became not a way to socialize with those like you or to raise your status or affluence, but often became an act of service. The poor, the outcast, the untouchables, the despised, they all were welcomed into Christian homes and places of worship where it was made clear to them that everybody present stood on the same level ground before the cross.

The church, of course, has too often failed to reflect our Master in this. I'm sure we as a church have failed more times than we would like to admit. But the solution for us is not to work harder at imagining that other people are better than they really are. They may be worse! No, the key for us is to realize that we, apart from Christ, are no more deserving of God's favor than anybody else. And when I say anybody else, I literally mean *anybody else!* It is only because of the sacrifice Christ made for us on the cross that any of us can know the love and favor of God. Once we realize this truth we are humbled. Forgiven, we now can forgive. Welcome, we now can welcome. Loved, we now can love.

Maybe you read the welcome on the front of bulletin this morning. It's not something I wrote, but words I've borrowed from another church which included them permanently on the cover of their bulletin. I wonder how these words strike you? Can you hear Jesus saying these words as he invites the world to sit at his table? Are these words you would say to those you invite to sit at your table?

These are not words meant to condone sin. They don't, actually. Jesus never condones sin. They are words that welcome sinners. They are words of hospitality, radical hospitality, the same sort of hospitality that made some people mad enough to want to kill Jesus.

⁵ I believe this quote can be attributed to Robert Boyd Munger, Presbyterian ministry and Fuller Theological Seminary professor.

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds.

We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like one of our pastors who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion," we've been there too.

If you blew all your offering money at the casino, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and insisted on going to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts. In a word, we welcome you.⁶

The centrality of the Table in our sanctuary reminds us that there is a day coming when we all will sit at Table with Jesus in his kingdom and that in that day we will be astonished to see the sorts of people who find themselves included. People like us.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 5:27-32 again. What first stands out to you from this passage?

⁶ Cited here: <https://www.quora.com/Who-are-the-modern-day-tax-collectors>

2. Jesus asks Levi to follow him and Levi immediately leaves everything and then goes and throws Jesus a great feast. How do you explain Levi's response? Have you ever known somebody (maybe yourself?) who had such a radical response to the call of Christ?
3. Who are the modern day tax collectors, people who are shunned by the 'saints' of the world who have determined that such people cannot possibly be friends of God?
4. What is it in religious people that can sometimes make them (us?) start drawing boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'?
5. Honestly, who is somebody in this world with whom you would not want to share a meal? Do you think Jesus feels the same way?
6. Jesus said he came for the sick and not the well. Which are you, sick or well?
7. It has been said, "The church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate." What do you think this means? Do you agree?
8. What is one practical step you can take (or we can take as a church) to follow Jesus' model by sitting down around tables with those some believe God has written off?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What sort of people does Jesus choose as friends?