

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

Mark 2:13-17

Luke 7:33-34

1 Cor. 11:23-26

Gal. 2:11-14

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August 4, 2019

Today we celebrate communion. It is one of the two central rituals of the Christian church, the other being baptism. Communion means “fellowship” and in the ritual of communion we celebrate our fellowship with Christ and with one another. Communion is also called by two other names. Sometimes it is called “The Lord’s Supper” since it is Jesus who is the host of this meal. It is also known as the “Eucharist” which means “thanksgiving.”

When we celebrate communion, we remember Jesus’s last supper with his disciples before his arrest and execution. Our earliest record of Christians celebrating communion for the purpose of remembering Jesus’ death is found in the passage from Paul in 1 Corinthians that was just read for us. But the gospels report that Jesus shared many meals with other people and the first such report comes from Mark’s gospel, which is the earliest gospel we have. While Paul’s letters are earlier than the gospels, Mark’s is the earliest of our four gospels. And the first supper that Mark records is the story of Jesus eating in the house of Levi the tax collector. Whereas Jesus’s last supper is forever associated with the memory of his betrayal and death, Jesus’ first supper evoked a scandal because he was seen eating with the wrong people. For this reason, we have to ask: is there a relation between the first supper and the last supper? Did the kind of shocking behavior exhibited by Jesus in his first recorded supper have anything to do with why he was later betrayed by one of his own disciples and why he was executed? Did the first supper set in motion a series of events that led, step by step, to the last supper?

In the ancient world it was very important to exercise caution when eating a meal with someone. There were boundaries to be observed and taboos that were not to be violated. Certain foods were not to be eaten and certain people were not to be eaten with. So, when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees were scandalized: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:16). Who were these people and what was wrong with eating with them?

In Jesus’ day, tax collectors weren’t merely employees of the Internal Revenue Service. Rather, they were viewed as traitors of the Jewish people since the taxes being collected by them went to Rome. I suppose nobody likes paying taxes, but there is nothing immoral about working for the I.R.S. For the Jews of that time, however, tax collectors were collaborating with the foreign oppressor who occupied their country. Imagine how we would feel if our country were being controlled by a foreign power and our officials were using our tax dollars to support it? We too might feel differently about tax collectors. We too might view them as traitors.

Similarly, in Jesus’ day, “sinners” were a particular class of people who fell so far below the standards of Jewish morality that they were despised as being beyond the pale. They were considered outside of the law of Moses. No respectable Jew would invite them to dinner. We Christians have been taught that all people are sinners, but that is not what is going on in Mark’s gospel. The sinners there are sharply distinguished from the righteous, which is why Jesus answers his critics by saying, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Here in Jesus’ first supper, then, we see him eating with those who were morally compromised because of how they earned their living as well as with those who were outside the religious and moral norms of Judaism. This kind of conduct was typical of Jesus’s ministry. But his conduct also gave offense to those who saw themselves as upholding the highest religious and moral norms of the Jewish community. In the gospels, we read that Jesus had gained a

reputation as ““a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”” (Luke 7:34). It’s remarkable that the New Testament reports such an unflattering comment about Jesus. Whereas Jesus’ mentor John the Baptist lived as an ascetic who didn’t indulge in dinner parties or drink wine, and who preached a message of hellfire and damnation warning sinners of God’s impending judgment, Jesus enjoyed such dinner parties and the company of the disreputable people he hung out with. The message he preached to tax collectors and sinners was the assurance that God loved them and welcomed them. His table fellowship with them was intended to bring this point home to them: “You are valuable in God’s sight.” But such conduct gave offense to many religious leaders. No doubt, such offense played a role in the reasons leading to Jesus’ eventual execution. The first supper points clearly to the last supper.

A similar episode is related in the Letter to the Galatians concerning the early church’s mission to non-Jews. When the church, which was originally composed of Jewish followers of Jesus, decided to reach out to the Gentiles (non-Jews), it faced the question of what to do with meals since Jews are forbidden by the Law of Moses to eat certain foods eaten by Gentiles. Such foods were considered by Jews to be “unclean” (Lev. 11). But Paul and those associated with him believed that Christians are free from the law; hence, Jewish Christians were free to eat meals with Gentile Christians (Rom. 14:14). As Paul says of himself in 1 Corinthians, “To those outside the law I became as one outside the law” (9:21a). In the Book of Acts, Peter is given a vision from God instructing him to eat Gentile food that the law forbids Jews to eat; but Peter protests: “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is...unclean” (Acts 10:14). Yet the response to Peter’s protest is clear: ““What God has cleansed, you must not call [unclean]”” (Acts 10:15). As a result of what Peter learned about food, he learned an important lesson about people as well: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone...unclean” (Acts 10:28).

In Antioch, however, Peter had second thoughts. When other Jewish Christians arrived on the scene who believed that the Gentile Christians needed to live as Jews and eat Jewish food, Peter pulled back from his previous table fellowship with the Gentiles. Paul then accused Peter of hypocrisy: “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:14). Paul goes on to remind Peter of what he and the other Jewish Christians claim to believe: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law” (Gal. 2:16). Notice how Paul characterizes the Gentiles: they are “sinners.” This is how Jews looked upon them. As a group of persons living outside of the law of Moses, they were, by definition, sinners. Just as the group of Jews with whom Jesus ate were categorized as “sinners” by other Jews since they failed to observe the law, so too all non-Jews were seen as sinners because they were outside of the law. Yet Paul is using this language about the Gentiles as sinners rhetorically simply to remind Peter of what they and the other Jewish followers of Jesus have come to believe: we are not made right with God by observing the law of Moses. Yet, in spite of Peter’s belief that what Paul said was true, he apparently had a hard time actually living out consistently the implications of his new belief. According to this new Christian belief, “sinners” are not to be identified with a specific group of people who can be neatly distinguished from other people who are “righteous” since, as Paul says in Romans, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Lest we think that what we witness in the New Testament is a particularly Jewish problem, let us remind ourselves of our own situation as Christians. We too are inclined to think of certain people as sinners, as outcasts by comparison with those of us who are righteous in God’s sight. I recall an incident from my days working as a hospital chaplain. I was summoned one afternoon to the pediatric unit where I met a young couple who had a severely deformed

infant. Although the baby was less than a year old, it had already been through numerous surgeries and was being prepped for another. The parents asked if I would baptize their baby. Of course, I was glad to baptize their baby, but in cases such as this I would always first ask whether the parents had a church of their own so that we might invite their minister or priest to come and baptize the child. This way the baptism could be an extension of that church's ministry and the family would be connected with their own congregation. But I quickly learned that this couple was unmarried and the church of which they were members had no knowledge that they had had a baby out of wedlock, let alone that their baby was terribly sick and on the verge of death. It was clear that theirs was a very conservative church and that having conceived a child outside of marriage was considered a grave sin. They believed that the reason their child was deformed was God's punishment of them for their sin. I could feel the sense of deep shame they felt as they explained the situation to me and why they felt they couldn't call their own pastor to baptize the child. When I learned this, I was both sad and angry. I was very sad that this couple was undergoing such a terrible ordeal without the support of their church community. God knows they needed the pastoral support of their church at a time like this. And I was angry that this couple felt they had to hide what was going on in their lives lest their fellow Christians condemn them as "sinners." Yet, how often this sort of thing happens in churches. The one community that is supposed to be our refuge when the storms of life threaten to overtake us becomes the place where we most fear judgment and condemnation. And how eager some Christians are to cast the first stone at those they condemn as sinners. And, yet, how odd, how contrary to the example of Jesus who embraced those who were called "sinners" by the religious people of his day. Instead of throwing stones at them, Jesus invited them to have dinner with him. How odd, how contrary to the example of the early church, when the followers of Jesus

crossed the divide separating Jews from the Gentiles who by definition were considered “sinners.” Instead of insisting that the Gentiles become Jews and eat like Jews, these Jewish Christians set aside the commandments found in the Bible in order to eat with these outsiders to the Jewish community. So, filled with both sadness and anger, I proceeded to baptize their child, welcoming him into the Christian church and dignifying his parents as people who were worthy of the attention and pastoral care of the church as they suffered through their personal nightmare. I also told them that I didn’t believe God was punishing them and that the baby’s deformity was simply an accident of nature. A few weeks later I was called back to the pediatric ward, this time because the baby had died. I sat with the couple for a long time and we talked and prayed and cried and took turns holding the dead baby. I don’t know whatever became of that young couple, but the memory of them has remained etched in my soul to this very day.

There are so many people in our society who are like that couple. They feel rejected by the church and thus stay away from the church. They feel condemned by the church as the “tax collectors and sinners” of our day, because their ambiguous and complex lives fall far short of what the church considers as ideal. Fortunately, many such people participate in recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous that practice an alternative form of spirituality known as the “Twelve Steps.” You can often hear such people describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” That is to say, while they have given up on institutional forms of religion like the church, they are still pursuing a spiritual path in life. But they don’t believe they can find what they’re looking for in the church. In my encounters with those in recovery groups, shame is a major issue that comes up time and again. Shame is different from guilt. Whereas guilt tells me that I have done something wrong, shame is a pervasive feeling that I *am* wrong, that there is something fundamentally wrong with me as a person. Consequently, I am unacceptable,

unworthy, and beneath the dignity of other people. Unfortunately, too many people report that this is how they felt in the churches. I find this to be terribly sad and completely unnecessary. The church should be the one place where we can come with our entire lives, in all their messy complexity and ambiguity; it should be the one place where we don't feel ashamed of who we are; it should be the one place where we know we will find acceptance and support; it should be the one place in our society where we can breathe a sigh of relief that we are finally at home with real, genuine human beings who care about us for who we really are and who don't condemn us for who we have failed to be. What if this was how people generally thought about the church?

The Jews have a Yiddish word to refer to people who stand out because of their compassion, genuineness, and lack of pretense. The word is "Mensch." To call someone a *Mensch* is to say: "Now there's a real human being!" To call someone a *Mensch* is to say, "That's a person who shows the rest of us what it means to be authentically human." That's what Jesus was: a *Mensch*. In the way he lived and related to others, he showed the rest of us what it means to be truly human. He related to others with compassion, he treated others with respect—and not just some others but all others! He especially welcomed into his fellowship those who were despised and disdained by the religious folk. He embraced those dismissed by them as "tax collectors and sinners" and he restored to them their sense of dignity and worthiness. He reminded them that they are human beings like the rest of us who deserve to be treated as such. What if this was the reputation of Christians? What if people said, "If you want to meet a *Mensch*, go to church"?

In the southern states of this country there used to be segregated lunch counters so that whites would not eat with blacks. This was a way for white people to say to black people, "you are not worthy to eat with us." Three years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed these

segregated lunch counters, a movie appeared called “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” starring Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn, and Sidney Poitier. It is the story of a young white woman who brings her black fiancé home to meet her parents. Like the story of Jesus’ first supper eating with sinners and tax collectors or the story of the early Jewish followers of Jesus eating with Gentiles, this story is a tale about crossing boundaries and welcoming those who have been rejected as unacceptable. Like those other two stories, this movie shows how much love and courage it takes to tear down these artificial boundaries; and yet, this is precisely what a *Mensch* does, because a *Mensch* is a real, honest-to-God human being who gives to other human beings the respect and dignity that is theirs simply by virtue of being human.

As we come to this celebration of communion, let us not forget Jesus’ first supper and its connection with his last supper. Jesus aroused opposition and hostility among the religious leaders of his day for violating the boundaries designed to separate Jewish sinners from righteous Jews. Yet the early church went far beyond his example by eating with non-Jews. “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” is not only the title of a great movie; it could just as well serve as the guiding question we should always be asking ourselves as a church whenever we celebrate this meal designed to call us back to the memory of Jesus. Are we willing to embrace those who are alienated from the churches, who feel disgraced, ashamed, and worthless, and who have been told that they don’t belong? Whenever we come to this meal, Jesus the host asks us: “Guess who’s coming to dinner?”

So, who’s coming to dinner today? I am, Lord, I am. Amen.