

The Table
Matthew 9:9-13

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The dinner table is a focal point of many houses – maybe not so much now... but it was and it still is at my parents' house. The table that we used to have was a circular table with one post in the middle of it and four feet that went out to stabilize it. It was the perfect size for four people. The perfect size for my family. It was a place that I would do my homework and ask my mom for help with my math. It was the place where I would play boardgames and lose horribly at monopoly and leave the table frustrated. It was the place where I would talk to friends about what plans we wanted to make for the weekend as we talked over a drink and food. It was where I talked to my family about my life – when I felt like I could – and where I would lay out my day – the good and the bad – and reflect on it with them. It was a safe place for me to be open with my family and friends. We shared many good times while eating, playing, and enjoying each other's company at this table. There are many memories tied to that old dinner table, but what I love most about this table is that I know I was always welcome to that table. I was never told to go away and was invited – no expected - to be there especially when dinner was ready.

The great thing about tables is that they are everywhere and are used for various reasons. Starbucks has many tables that we use to place our coffees as we meet new people or catch up with old friends as we energize ourselves with that sweet nectar of caffeine. We use tables together to celebrate our children's victory in sports or graduations as we consume that delectable pizza. We use the bed of trucks as a table when we tailgate to root for our favorite football team. We even use the ground as our gathering place to have a picnic when the weather isn't 100 degrees – or 100 degrees below zero – I mean anything can be a table where we gather together to be with one another. In all of these instances where we have gathered with others to share our experiences there has probably been a table there as our foundation of a meeting ground - being welcomed and invited. It's a beautiful thing!

In our gospel text today, we see many people gathering around a table with Jesus. He was with the disciples, Pharisees - tax collectors - and sinners, and this is quite a unique and odd group of people gathering together at one table. This is such

a unique situation because it was a mixture of people that at that time would be unheard of in the Jewish community because of the standards set by Jewish Law. At this table there are people who are identified as sinners. These sinners were people who most likely committed public sins that everyone knew about, or these people were gentiles: non-Jewish people. There are also tax-collectors. These tax-collectors were hated by the Jews. They were hated by them because they were considered traitors by their business dealings. It was assumed that they stole money – which they probably did because they would want to please the Romans who were above them for their own benefit, and to top this gathering off there were the disciples – those who are following Jesus – a great teacher, yes, - but a very controversial one to the Jewish hierarchy in what he did. The Pharisees here at this gathering observe Jesus eating with these people that have no business being near Jewish teachers because of their unclean sin, and while observing this they ask Jesus’ disciples – “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Now when they asked this question it was not a question whispered in someone’s ear. This was asked out loud to the disciples and Jesus heard it at the table – the tax collectors heard it - the sinners heard it, and in hearing it I wonder what the disciples were thinking because when the Pharisees asked this, they put the disciples on the spot. They had the teachers of the Law asking them to defend their teacher. They were asking – “Why is he doing this? This is not what we teach. These unrighteous people are not welcome near us.” - What are the disciples supposed to say? They grew up listening to these teachers of the Law their whole life. How are they supposed to defend Jesus who is going against what they know of the Law? These sinners and unclean people separate them from God by their unrighteousness – their sin. In this instance the disciples were probably looking directly at Jesus pondering what to say – that’s a bold question – a hard one to answer when the Pharisees knew the Law so well.

I also wonder what everyone else was thinking. The Pharisees made it clear that no one was welcome at that table – that no one deserved to be near them – the Pharisees were righteous and did not want to lose their righteousness because of Jesus’ “mistake” being with them... Was there a moment of silence? Did the tax collectors and sinners wonder if they should actually be there? If they did, then I can imagine the loneliness they must have felt. I remember multiple times sitting alone, wondering if I belonged. I remember the dread of lunch time in high school. I sat at a table by myself in the middle of the huge lunchroom hoping to be invited to sit at a lunch table with people to meet. I never went to a table because I felt the judgmental eyes on me when I walked in. I never thought I was good enough to sit with the “cool” people. Those were some horrendous days. I even remember times

sitting at my apartment table alone – judging myself about my day - wondering if I was a good enough teacher – wondering what the parents, students, and my colleagues thought about me. I did not feel like I belonged – I did not feel worthy. I think we have all sat a table alone after a day where we have seemed to do everything wrong wondering if anyone will sit with us - wondering about our belonging - our worthiness to our family, our friends - even God. When we do, we say to ourselves in these moments what the Pharisees said, “who invited you?”

But what is essential to this story is that this table where everyone gathered was not the Pharisees’ table. This table was Matthew’s who prepared a feast for all of them with Jesus as his special guest. Jesus who was well known in the Jewish community was openly – blatantly – with “these” people and the Pharisees did not understand this. They didn’t want to understand. They were blinded by their pride. They did not want to mix together their “perfect” lives with the unclean tax collectors and sinners at that table. The Pharisees saw themselves at the head of the table - but here, everyone was at circular table – no one was above anyone else. The Pharisees could not and did not understand this, and putting myself in the place of those tax collectors and sinners I can feel the distraught heart they must have had in that moment of silence - waiting for a response – wondering if they were actually welcome at that table when they had been denied invitations by everyone else who knew them who did not want to be with them because of their mistakes – their sins. They came to this table for the hope for forgiveness – for some sort of hope – but it was now up in the air of silence as they waited for an answer. I bet all their eyes were on the disciples or on Jesus - waiting – hoping for the best – but expecting the worst – being hopeless – because denial was all they heard from the Pharisees.

To break the silence Jesus said - “I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”. There - in that moment, a new moment of silence was created – not a silence of distraught wondering hearts - but hearts of joy - hearts of hope and peace was brought about. Jesus made this table his – these people – the tax collectors and sinners - were welcome and invited to be with him at that table. They were called there for Him to show them His mercy, grace and love. Jesus was there for them so that they might receive him in his calling of them and in Him is his mercy, forgiveness, and love. God invited them and welcomed them to his table so that they might receive His promise of forgiveness and salvation and be with him at his heavenly table in the new creation. Christ’s death on the cross - with those sinners’ and tax collectors’ sins upon him - no longer separated them from God - The Old covenant was no more. When the Pharisees brought the Law Jesus said “No more – I have come to you having already fulfilled

the Law to give you me – I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” I added a little bit, but this is what he said to all those there. He tells this to us as well. When we sit at a table with a distraught heart not knowing where to turn - we turn to Christ in prayer. He comes and tells us to lay it all out on the table because he is here – listening – forgiving – and loving you as he is yours and you are his at the meeting place of your table. There are no Pharisees to tell you that you are unworthy because Christ made us worthy by giving us himself and inviting us to him through the Holy Spirit and His Word.

The beautiful thing is that you can pray and turn to Him anywhere at any time at any table. When you order your coffee at Starbucks – You can thank him for that caffeine to get you through this day and thank him for the means to get it and for his mercy to bless you with that wonderful drink and wonderful sacrifice that he made for you. When you celebrate your child’s victory in sports or their graduation you can thank him together - for the blessing of life and being able to come together for success, or fun when there is defeat and thank him for fulfilling the Law that we could never fulfill and the promise we have in him - Or when you gather with friends around the tailgate at your favorite sports team you can thank for the beautiful day and great times with friends – you can thank Him for your friends and family and thank him for the celebration that you will have with him when Jesus returns to be with you forever.

Like I said before we have tables everywhere, but God has placed a table in our midst in the church – to remind us that this is His house and that he invites and welcomes us to reveal his mercy and grace. We gather here to His table that he invites us to everyday - to commune with us - and give to us himself and in himself is the promise of Jesus Christ our savior who died for our sins. We have been brought here to strengthen our faith to talk to Christ to hear His word and be with one another. We come here as tax collectors – as sinners with our hope in Jesus Christ our Lord who desires mercy and has called all us sinner here to partake in his body and blood and be righteous as we leave this building as a new creation in Him – and as we go into the world we can invite others to our tables to share the good news of Christ in our life – how he called us sinners to him to show us His mercy and work in our lives – and we can give a testimony to the world around us about how Christ invites everyone to his table to do the same so that he might be with them forever when he returns because he died for each one of us because of his love and mercy.

Amen

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