

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
14 September 2025

Luke 15:1-10

Jesus is the host at a meal. What this probably means is that someone decided to host a meal in Jesus' honor and Jesus was allowed to invite whomever he wanted. The Pharisees and scribes are there, and they don't approve of those people Jesus invited. They say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." At first, the complaint seems petty to us. Who cares who Jesus invites to supper? Why is this a big issue? To fully understand this we must look into fellowship meal customs in First Century Palestine.

Before we do this let me tell you a little joke. A dietitian was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. "The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago. Red meat is awful. Soft drinks erode your stomach lining. Chinese food is loaded with MSG. Vegetables can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water. But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all and we all have, or will, eat it. Can anyone here tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?" A 75-year-old man in the front row stood up and said, "Wedding cake."

In first century Palestine to invite someone to dinner was a great honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a meal meant sharing life. Invitations were not given out lightly. After all, the guest is assumed to be bringing honor to the house in which he is entertained. The prevailing wisdom dictated that the righteousness and holiness of the guest was extended to the host family. Associating with a sinner threatened the status, honor, and spiritual cleanliness of any righteous Jew.

According to our passage today, Jesus not only eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners, but he also "welcomes" or "receives" them. This is a grave offense and there is more at stake than honor, shame and social respectability. Eating and drinking with these "undesirables" represented a violation of religious uprightness, proper covenant behavior, loyalty to the traditions, and hence to the aspirations of Israel. Table fellowship was one of the signs that showed the world your loyalty to God and country.

The Pharisees attitudes seem to be supported by Old Testament Scriptures, which makes Jesus even more radical in his behaviors. The Old Testament presents

special meals to ratify covenants between God and God's people (Genesis 26:30-31; Exodus 24:9-11), for weddings and family celebrations (Genesis 29:22-23), for military victories (Genesis 14:18), for extending hospitality to strangers (Genesis 18:1-8), to celebrate Passover (Exodus 12), etc. There is really no precedent, however, for meals that involve the table fellowship between righteous Jews and outcast classes. In fact, in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:2 you begin to see a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles, particularly in the context of meals.

When the Pharisees oppose Jesus on religious grounds, they are relying on these biblical and extra-biblical traditions. But they also oppose Jesus on nationalistic and ethnocentric grounds. During the time we call "Second Temple Judaism" (Between 515 B.C. to 70 A. D.) the Jews developed rabbinical teachings on purity laws, meant to separate the Jews from the Greek influences of the day. At a time when their national identity was being threatened, the Jews began to emphasize their distinctiveness from the nations to protect against the advancement of Greek culture: Greek language, philosophy, gymnasiums, Olympic games, symposia (banquet meals where men drank, ate, shared philosophy, and engaged in sexual pleasure, etc.) To be a good Jew meant to avoid the practices of the nations, most especially table fellowship with sinners and Gentiles (1 Maccabees 1:62-63, 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42, etc.)

Jesus' actions show a radical love for the outcast as he eats and drinks with average tax collectors (Mark 2:13-17); women of ill-repute (Luke 7:36-50); Roman employees (Luke 19:1-10); dirty peasants in the wilderness (Mark 6:30-44); and even with his own critics, the Pharisees (Luke 14:1-24). These meals with sinners anticipate the great banquet at the end of days when Jesus will host people of every language, every nation, every race, and every social class. Now, remember the reason Jesus gives for eating with tax collectors and sinners: to lead them into repentance and faith. Not everyone is saved, and no one is saved apart from repentance and faith in Jesus. For Jesus, table fellowship with sinners was worth re-interpreting Israel's traditions and practices.

This is how much God loves sinners! This love is as real today as it was then. Even today, the Holy Spirit leads people everywhere into repentance and a saving faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus continues to eat with sinners everywhere, both as the host at the feast and the very banquet that is eaten. When you come before this altar today, I invite you to think of the meal served here as the great banquet of Jesus of Nazareth. Today, he welcomes us as his precious guests, even when we are not deserving of his love and his mercy for us. Even though we walk away from God and fail to serve him. Even if we at times become rebellious children who give our backs to God and his grace.

Today he welcomes and receives us into his holy presence. So, come to him without pretense. Come to him without entitlement. Come to him in humility. Come to him in great joy because he has chosen you and I to be his guests and he treats us as precious children. Jesus Christ died on the cross to save the lost. This meal we will serve in a few minutes is the celebration banquet that remembers his great sacrifice on our behalf. Approach this table then with confidence. You are forgiven, you are accepted, you are welcome. There is no longer judgement and condemnation for those who follow Christ. You are the sheep that has been found, come rejoice and celebrate, there is more joy in heaven today over you and I, repented sinners, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. This is our banquet, and the host awaits you eagerly.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!