

Table Fellowship: A Sign of God's Nearness

From the series: The Faith of Jesus: Trust in a Gracious God

Text: Mark 2:15

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Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent I, February 28, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

When Jesus was at table in his house, many bad characters . . . were seated with him." Mark 2:15

We have entered another Lenten season. The advantage of the celebration of the Christian year is that it brings us annually through those events, and gives us opportunity to hear those stories that have shaped us as a community of faith and as the body of Christ. So we come once again into this Lenten cycle and we begin our Lenten pilgrimage, following the steps of our Lord, as it leads to his death, his crucifixion.

But it is not as though we simply revisit the old story. It is not as though it has all been said before. The stories are the same. The events are the same. But we are not the same. There is the passion and pilgrimage of Jesus, and then there is the pilgrimage of each one of us. We come as different people. For one thing we are a year older than last time. Every time we come, we come as those who have had new experiences. Some of us have been devastated. Some of us have been exhilarated, and all of us have gone through the kinds of experiences that have changed us and will make it such that our angle of vision is a bit different this time as we come through the old familiar cycle once again. I probably am more aware of that than you, because I have both the privilege and the responsibility to prepare for this season with greater intensity than would be expected of any one of you. It has been my custom over many years now to leave you for an extended time, prior to this season, in order that I might do some new and in-depth preparation and come back ready for this Holy Season. As I reflect and prepare I am conscious of new lenses, new insights rising to the surface.

With the capacity of computers today, if someone were to enter in all of the themes and texts of my Lenten preaching over 22 years, I am sure that you could see evidence of such shifts of perspective. As a matter of fact, I am aware of a very significant shift in my own perspective and understanding going back at least

three years now. Back in 1991 I preached on "The Sign of The Cross, The Way of Jesus." Rather than looking back from the perspective of Paul, I began to suggest we walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Paul's perspective is very much the perspective of the Church in its theological tradition. Paul, after Good Friday and after Easter, steps back, and from the perspective of post-Easter looks at that death and tries to make sense of it. Essentially, Paul raises the question: What was the meaning of that death?

And I think for many years that was also the question that occupied me, trying to make sense of that death, trying to understand that whole complex of ideas that we call atonement. Was it necessary for Jesus to die so that we might be forgiven? Those questions were really Paul's questions. Paul was the first Christian theologian, I suppose, and Paul's reflection on Jesus, on crucifixion, on resurrection were the shapers of our Christian tradition. But of late it seems to me that the significant question for us is not Paul's question, What was the meaning of that death?, but rather, following in Jesus' footsteps, to attempt to peer through his lenses and then ask, "Why?" More and more I began to ask myself, "Why? What was there in Jesus that caused the human community of his day to crucify him?" That question, it seems to me, is significant for us as we seek to become the disciples of Jesus. The other question, Paul's question, is more a theological question.

So this year again, I continue, probing and asking - but this year investigating the *faith* of Jesus. In the series title I suggest that the core of that faith was trust in a gracious God. I want us to think together, "What did Jesus believe?"

We don't often think of Jesus as a man of faith, do we? Didn't he know everything? Didn't he have a card up his sleeve? Didn't he just sort of go through this thing as a charade? No, I don't think so. A lot of very exciting New Testament research coming out today is able to pull back some layers and to see Jesus the Jew, Jesus the believing Jew. While I have been gone I have read several of these books. One book was entitled, *The Marginal Jew*. Another, *The Historical Jesus: The Story of a Mediterranean Peasant Jew*. And a third one, *Jesus, a Life*. It was exciting to see these studies uncover the concrete context of Jesus' Jewishness and his historical allure, to see the contours of Jesus: what he believed, how he lived, how he acted. It is out of that concrete context that, I believe, we must come to some kind of understanding of why he was crucified.

We have the Table set here this morning. We do that in remembrance of Jesus, for on the night in which he was betrayed we believe he gathered with his intimate disciples, and he broke bread and he poured the cup and gave them that tangible sign of his presence. But, beyond that, was he not also saying to those that were his most intimate associates, his friends, "Be with me while I share this last cup with you. I need you." He was looking for human support and succor in this point of crisis in his life. And as a matter of fact, this is not so out of sync with the whole of his life. If you go through the gospels with this in mind, you will find

that Jesus was always having supper. Simon the Pharisee invited him to supper. He was often found eating at Mary and Martha's home in Bethany. He was always sitting at table with someone. The four Gospels all record the feeding of the five thousand. There was something about Jesus that in his table fellowship signaled the nearness of God, and when the Gospel writers remembered the historical Jesus, the thing that they remembered and continually brought to expression was the table fellowship of Jesus. Jesus was a party hound.

The last supper was not something out of line with what had been the hallmark of his life. He sat down with people. In response to some of his critics in Matthew, the 11th chapter, he just sort of shakes his head and says, "You know, I can't win with you people. John the Baptist came, neither eating nor drinking, and they said he had a demon. He said, 'I come both eating and drinking and you call me a wine bibber and a glutton.'" [And because we want to be like Jesus we have Pete Theune on Team who is our Minister of Gourmet. (Laughter) We are always eating here, aren't we?] But for Jesus this was the way he bonded with people.

With whom do you sit at table? You sit at table with those whom you love. Somebody says, "Let's have a meal together." You say, "Not with you." Or you say, "Oh, I'd be delighted." You don't just eat with anybody. You don't eat around do you? (Laughter) Nancy and I have just returned from Florida, and it always amazes me. You live with people all weeks and months of the year, and then you discover that you are going to be within fifty miles for ten days down in Florida of someone who lives down the block. They say, "Oh, let's get together." My goodness. You can't believe how tough it is to take a vacation! Everybody that is with me all year wants to "get together" on vacation – you know, "Come and have a meal." Well, it's because that's the way we experience community and express friendship. And it was even more so in that culture of which Jesus was a part. Hospitality was a prime concern. And to sit down and break bread with someone was a sign of acceptance, of embrace. The Dutch New Testament scholar, Edward Schillebeex, said that was the very hallmark of Jesus. The presence of God was mediated by Jesus while he sat at table.

In the text of this morning, Jesus embraced the wrong people. In the listing of the text in the bulletin from the New English Bible, it says he was sitting at meal with "bad characters." Shame on Jesus. Sitting down with "bad characters," tax collectors and sinners. He went through the tollbooth and Matthew, (Levi, as he was called by his fellow Jews) was there, taking toll. Jesus said, "Follow me." And Matthew said, "Not me. You don't know who I am." Jesus said, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him. Matthew was a tax collector, ritually unclean, excluded from the community of God's people, an outsider, and Jesus said, "Follow me." And Matthew couldn't believe it. When he found that Jesus was serious, Matthew said, "Let's have a party." Matthew invited his friends. And who were his friends? Other "bad characters." The religious right came to Jesus' disciples and said, "What's he doing eating with bad characters, tax collectors and sinners?" That's why in the end they killed him.

In the table fellowship which was the hallmark of Jesus ministry, he gave witness to what he really believed, and that is that God is gracious and invites all. That word is very threatening to a religious institution. A religious institution is strong to the extent that it can create an over-againstness with all of those who are not "our kind." Isn't it remarkable, really, that the Church has duplicated the very mentality of the Jewish community of Jesus' day in its exclusion from this table? It has said, "Oh, *you* can't come," or "If you ask permission, perhaps you can come," or "Is everything right in your life so that you might come here?" or "Whoa, not *you*!" But not Jesus. Jesus opened his table of fellowship to all people. And it was that kind of thinking, that kind of behavior that got Jesus crucified.

I have said on occasion, "Rather than putting a fence around this table, we should set it up on Savidge Street and offer bread and wine to those passing by on their way to skiing up north, saying, "Have bread and wine for the journey, and have a good Sabbath." What did Jesus believe? Jesus believed in a gracious God, and he would sit down with anyone in order to communicate in his action, in his openness and availability, that God's embrace was wide enough to include them. He mediated the Presence of God and the offer of salvation in the table fellowship, which was the characteristic of his whole life and ministry. What did Jesus believe? That God was trying to get God's arms around all sorts and conditions of humankind. They killed him for that. And the Church has been excluding people ever since, duplicating the very spirit and attitude that rejected and crucified Jesus.

It really blows my mind when I think about it. What Jesus wants us to sense when we come here is that God's arms are around us. If Jesus were here I believe he would say to you, "You come." And you would say, "Ah, but Lord." And he would say, "You come." You would protest and say, "But you don't know," and he would say, "Oh, yes I do. You really need to come." And then when we come, there is that sense of our belonging to one another. That was the intuition behind that old tradition of saying, "If you are not right with your brother or sister, you don't come here." Because this is a table of reconciliation. This is a family meal and you have got to be right with one another.

This whole congregation, in a few moments, will be on its feet and moving and flowing, and there will be a sense of our coming together because we are one. We belong to each other. We embrace one another. We support one another. We care for one another. We are God's people, God's children. We are brothers and sisters. That's what Jesus demonstrated concretely in his action and behavior. He broke bread with *all* people as a sign that there is grace for *all*.

And he says to you, "You come. You come. This is for you."