

March 3, 2024  
Rev. Lisa Schrott  
Luke 5:27-32  
*Sinners at the Table*

This Lenten season we are considering the feeding stories in the Gospel of Luke – stories that speak to our hunger for food, for companionship, and for the presence of God. Stories about who is welcomed to the table to have their hunger fed. Our scripture this morning is from the early days of Jesus' ministry. In the beginning of chapter 5 in Luke's Gospel, we hear Jesus call his first disciples. We then hear two stories of healing – the cleansing of a man with leprosy and the healing of man who was paralyzed. Not only does Jesus heal this man, he also tells him that his sins have been forgiven. This statement ruffles the feathers of the religious leaders who had gathered around – the scribes and the Pharisees. They question just who Jesus thinks he is that he can forgive sins, saying, "for who can forgive sins but God alone?" We pick up the story here in Luke chapter 5 verse 27:

After this Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We have two stories of feasting this morning in our service, as we prepare to come to the Table and feast on the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation. We heard Rebecca read the beloved story from the book of Genesis that is often used as our call to hospitality. Abraham sees three strangers standing by his tent in the heat of the day. He greets them, inviting them to rest, and to have some bread to be refreshed before they continue on their journey. He asks his wife Sarah to make a cake. He runs to his herd of cattle and takes a calf to be prepared for the strangers, and serves it along with curds and milk. A feast is prepared for these three strangers. It is a joyful event – a recognition of our common need to be refreshed and restored; a celebration of being able care for others by providing bread for their journey – even when the "others" are strangers.

In contrast, the story from Luke's Gospel does not share this festive ambience. The tax collector Levi hosts a great banquet for Jesus after Jesus called Levi to be his follower. This should be a moment of celebration, for Levi is leaving behind a profession that was disparaged by the community. Not only were tax collectors considered to be agents of the

Roman Empire, they were also notorious for charging extra and skimming proceeds off their collections. They were the means of impoverishment for people living in an occupied territory. And yet Jesus calls Levi to be his follower. A bold and remarkable act. Then astonishingly, Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. I'm sure the faces in the crowds could not believe what they just saw. And if that was not enough of a brouhaha, Levi invites Jesus to dinner. Well – actually Levi hosts not just a dinner, but a great banquet for Jesus in his house. And the cherry on top of all of this scandal is that a large crowd of tax collectors and others – identified as sinners - joined the banquet, reclining at the table with Jesus and Levi.

The response of the religious leaders – the scribes and the Pharisees - could not have been more different than the response of Abraham. Abraham celebrated with the strangers – welcoming them and bestowing his best on them. But rather than celebrating that Levi, this man of ill repute, was leaving behind his corrupt and dishonorable profession, the religious leaders heap scorn on the situation, derisively complaining to Jesus' disciples that Jesus had no place eating with this group of sinners.

And Jesus holds up a mirror and answers their complaints with words that 2000 years later still makes the church squirm: Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Who me? Are you talking about me? Awkward silence, as the religious leaders study the folds on their robes, the cracks in the wall, the table decor – anything to not have face the discomfort of being lumped in with those sinners in need of repentance.

Part of ministry training is something called CPE – clinical pastoral education. It is often done in a hospital setting – so you will hear pastors talk about their hospital chaplaincy rotations. But CPE is more than pastoral visits. It also forces you to look at what you bring to ministry – your strengths, your tender spots, your family history, your successes, your failures, the places that cause you deep discomfort that are hard to admit. In CPE you spend a lot of time talking about your feelings. A lot of time. And you learn a lot – at least I did. Some of it is practical – like how to respond when a hospital patient doesn't want to visit or pray with you – because they are angry at God or think God is irrelevant or because you are a woman.

And some of what you learn is also deeply personal and deeply humbling. Things you never really realized about yourself or the way you come off to others or the way you internalize the world around you. One of things I learned about myself is that I was uncomfortable being uncomfortable. I am one of those people who believes we all have something in common with each other and through conversation, humor and food, we can find that common thread. As I've moved around the country, traveled around the world, taught students from cultures so vastly different than my own – I rarely, if ever, have met someone I couldn't find some kind of connection with. I love hearing peoples stories and the places our lives have intersected. My CPE experience at the Veteran's Administration hospital in Atlanta affirmed that. Until one day when it didn't. I was struggling with connecting to a veteran who was dealing with some

significant emotional and psychological issues. I was sharing with my supervisor my frustration. And he asked me why it was so important for me to find a connecting point. And I said –without even thinking of the implications of my words - because it makes it more comfortable. And in the CPE probing way – he asked me why being comfortable was important. And I'm thinking – what – who wants to be uncomfortable? And then he challenged me to be uncomfortable and awkward. To not try and get to the easy rapport place right away. To be ok with discomfort. I leaned into that challenge during my chaplaincy internship. I continue to lean into it today as a pastor – not always perfectly. It is hard.

I imagine the religious leaders attending that great banquet at the home of Levi the tax collector experienced a lot of discomfort. The Pharisees were the keeper of the Torah – of the sacred law, and the scribes – the lawyers of the day. They were used to having the places of respect. The custom at that time was for important guests to have the places of honor around the table. Not only were these tax collectors and sinners taking their place at the table, but Jesus was claiming that he had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. This is the same Jesus who had just forgiven the sins of the man he had healed from paralysis. The Pharisees and scribes seem much more comfortable in their role of judging the sins of others than they do seeking forgiveness for their own sinfulness.

Acknowledging our sinfulness can be uncomfortable. I think that is one of the reasons why Lent is a more challenging season for us than Advent. The Rev. Tish Harrison Warren is an author and Anglican priest who writes a periodic column in *The New York Times*. Two years ago she reflected on this idea in a column titled "*We're All Sinners, and Accepting That Is Actually a Good Thing*." She says that Lent "is a season in preparation for Easter when Christians often focus on sin and repentance. One of the things that's most difficult to swallow about Christianity is the idea that normal, nice people are sinners, that we are born sinful and can't elude being a sinner by being moral or religious enough. It can seem gentler and kinder to think of human beings as basically good, our intuitions basically correct and our motives basically pure."<sup>1</sup>

Harrison Warren shares that while she could understand the need to confess the big systemic sins like greed, oppression, and violence where she struggled was acknowledging the personal and unique ways she remained separated from God and from others. She says, "In college, through a string of failed relationships and theological questioning, I came to understand sin as something more fundamental than rule breaking, more subtle and "under the hood" of my consciousness. It was the ways I would casually manipulate people to get my way. It was a hidden but obnoxious need for approval. It was that part of me that could not rejoice in a friend's big award or accomplishment, even as some other part told her, "Congratulations!" This is the slow dawning that I had about myself in college, and with it

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<sup>1</sup>Tish Harrison Warren. *We're All Sinners, and Accepting That Is Actually a Good Thing*. *The New York Times*. March 6, 2022; online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/opinion/sin-lent-grace-forgiveness.html>

came liberation. Far from being a crushing blow of self-hatred, the realization of my actual, non-theoretical sinfulness came with something like a recognition of grace.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Christ called the disciples, the crowds, the religious leaders of the day to be uncomfortable. He called Levi to give up a financially lucrative life as a tax collector and to follow him, an itinerant preacher. Levi knew that his presence was not going to be well received and he was going to have to put up with disdain and disrespect. It was going to be an uncomfortable place to be. And Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus.

The church, as Christ’s body, is going to call each of us to be uncomfortable too. Over the past two months here at PCO we have had conversations on recognizing our own biases and what it means to be an advocate, an ally, and activist for our siblings whose race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity are different than our own. It is an uncomfortable place to be. It is also the place to which Jesus calls us. To try. To ask for forgiveness when we get it wrong. And to not stop there. To try again and get a little closer to the kingdom of God here on Earth.

Lent gives us the opportunity each year to confront the places in our life that need to die off so that we can be reconciled to God and to each other. I think about in my own life the obstacles that interfere with my relationship with God – the boulders of ego and pride and illusion of control. That surely Christ’s death on the cross was for the “other people.” Nope. Christ’s death on the cross was to reconcile me – mortal, sinful, Lisa to God. I have to sit in that discomfort on the journey to the cross and the journey to the empty tomb. And I get to sit in the discomfort with my fellow travelers, sinners all of them too, seeking to be made whole through the unfathomable grace that has been gifted to us.

In a few minutes we will be invited to the table to feast on the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation. As Matt Croasmun and Miroslav Volf note in *The Hunger for Home* “Often, when we think about who is invited to the table, whom *others* invite, who *always* seems to have a seat at the table, we worry about who is being excluded. We call one another out for who’s left out. It’s the chief sin of our contemporary world: unfair exclusion. Jesus got in trouble for the opposite: he got in trouble for who was welcomed.”<sup>3</sup> And who did Jesus welcome to the table? He welcomed sinners, everyone of us. Let us pray.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Matt Croasmun and Miroslav Volf *The Hunger for Home: Food & Meals in the Gospel of Luke*. 2022. Baylor University Press; p43