

Dinner With A Sinner

Sterling UMC
November 14, 2010
Luke 5:27-32

Imagine a man cursed with leprosy; that hideous disease that rots the skin and literally eats away the flesh. This man knows that he has it. It is obvious to all who look at him. His face and hands are covered with oozing and bleeding open sores. Left unattended, day-by-day it gets a little bit worse, growing, spreading, infecting the entire body. And yet this man goes about his life as if there is nothing wrong. In his ignorance or should I say arrogance, he refuses to acknowledge that he has a problem. He denies the fact that he is slowly rotting to death, thinking instead, that he can take care of the problem himself that everything will be all right. That he doesn't need any help or any treatment. He puts on long sleeve shirts to try to conceal his sores from public view. He rubs some ointment over his raw flesh in an attempt to ease the pain. But all of his attempts are futile.

We imagine that and we think; "How stupid! How absolutely ridiculous! How completely ludicrous! This man is completely insane to think that all of his efforts are doing any good at all!"

Well my friends it is just as stupid, just as ridiculous, just as ludicrous, just as insane to think that we can save ourselves. Yes, we may deny that we have a problem. We may be able to conceal it from the public eye for a while. We may find some salve that temporarily deadens the pain. But ultimately our condition is terminal.

But that is the attitude of the Pharisees as we encounter them today in this story from Mark Chapter 2. It is the story of the call of Levi.

Jesus is walking along the road, when he sees a man named Levi sitting at the tax collector's booth. Jesus stops and he looks directly at Levi and probably to the astonishment of many, Jesus says two simple words "Follow me." Jesus must have seen something in Levi that made him a suitable prospect. Levi demonstrates that Jesus' estimation of him is not unwarranted. Immediately, Levi gets up from his seat, and leaving everything behind, he followed Jesus.

Now it is important for us to remember that tax collectors were among the most hated people in Jewish society. To begin with they were viewed as traitors to their own nation because they "sold themselves" to the Romans to work for the government. Each tax collector purchased from Rome the right to gather taxes; and the more he gathered, the more he could keep. They were considered thieves as well as traitors; and their constant contacts with gentiles made them religiously suspect, if not unclean.

But Levi opened his heart to Jesus Christ and became a new person. This was not an easy decision for him to make. By following Jesus he would be leaving behind his home as well as a lucrative career. But Levi opened his heart to Jesus and followed him.

Levi not only opened his heart to Jesus but he also opened his home. For immediately the scene changes and we are in Levi's house. Levi has thrown a great party for his new master. He puts on a great feast and invites all of his tax collector friends and obviously many others that the Pharisees considered to be "sinners";

unclean, sleazy, low-life scum.

This story reminds us that Jesus often hung out with some pretty sketchy people. He broke bread with people I would not like to be seen with in public. He made a point of seeking out people with bad reputations, and he raised the eyebrows of his society's most respectable people. And here the situation is no different. So the Pharisees go to his disciples and ask, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus overhears their question, and two thousand years later his answer still makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end: "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

There is nothing that gets to me any more than self-righteous, judgmental Christians; people with a pious, holler-than-thou attitude. And we see and hear them all the time. They walk around with their nose turned up as if to say, "Huh! Look at so-and-so. Look at what they are doing. I'm sure glad that I'm not like that." They are quick to point out all of the sins and the flaws in other people's lives, but they are totally oblivious to their own. Jesus has a lot to say about this. He says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see more clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Who do we think that we are? Why is it that it is so easy for those of us who call ourselves Christians to somehow think that we are better than everyone else; for us to stand in judgment of another person? Something has gone terribly wrong with the way we see other people, and perhaps even the way we see ourselves. How soon we forget that as Christians we are not perfect. That "there are none righteous, no not one." That "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." That as the old song says, "It's not my brother, not my sister, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." That "but for the grace of God, there go I."

As the apostle Paul says so powerfully in I Timothy 1:15-16; "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners -of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

That my friends is the lesson we learn from this story of the call of Levi. The first step, and most important step in coming to Jesus is to recognize your need. Those who are sure that they are righteous can't be saved because the first step in following Jesus is acknowledging our need and admitting that we don't have all of the answers. That was the difference between Levi and the Pharisees. Levi looked at Jesus and recognized his need. The Pharisee thought they already had all that they needed. It was when Levi realized that he was lost he was found. It was because the Pharisees thought they were found they were lost. They thought they had it all together. They didn't think that they needed anything or anyone else to prove their righteousness. But they were wrong. Dead wrong!

Jesus called Levi, the tax collector, the sinner. He wants to have dinner with a sinner. Jesus wants to hang with sinners, just as he went to the cross to hang for

sinners. He spent his time, not with the good people, not the upright and upstanding, not the ones with a tight rein on their minds and bodies, but rather, Jesus came for precisely the ones we're most likely to stigmatize and marginalize. Jesus seems to have a special place in his heart for the moral, or spiritual leper. He reached out to them not with sermons and moral exhortations, but with deep mercy, tender compassion, and genuine acceptance. Friends that is what our world is craving.

Aren't you glad of that? Doesn't that make you feel good? It does me. Why? Not because, in some pious way I feel sorry for all the no-good low life's. No! Why? Because I am one of them. You are one of them. We are all sinners in God's sight.

So, then, who is called to follow Jesus? Who does Jesus want to have dinner with? Who does Jesus want to join him around the table? What qualifies a person to be a friend of Jesus? Given Jesus' friends while he was on earth, I would conclude that that includes anybody who's ever been in a morally compromising or compromised situation. Anybody who's ever had a problem with anger or resentment would qualify. People who have ever had any trouble controlling their sexual thoughts and desires would be included. People whose bodies won't do what they want them to do certainly have a place. The sick, the halt, the lame, the delusional, the depressed and despairing, the underweight and the overweight, the people who think too much of their bodies, and the people who don't think enough of them, they all certainly belong. People with problems, people who create problems, people whose problems are unlike anybody else's problems are invited. People who think they are smarter or stronger or better than everybody else, people who think they are dumber or weaker or worse than everybody else, people who hate each other, people who hate themselves, people who worry too much, people who don't worry enough, people who put down on other people, people who don't stand up for themselves all receive an invitation. Add to that the ungrateful, the impatient, the greedy, the gossipy, people who take pleasure in other peoples' misfortunes, and people who waste time feeling sorry for themselves. Have I left anybody out? How about you?

But there is a catch. All are invited to come, but you must accept the invitation. And to accept the invitation to follow Jesus and to dine with Jesus means, you can come as you are, but you can't stay the way you are. When you expect the invitation, when you come to the table, and you receive that which Christ has done for you, you cannot get up and go the same way that you came. Why? For the invitation to his table is also an invitation to self-examination, to confession, and to repentance. When we come face to face with Jesus, when we are confronted by His holiness and righteousness, when we encounter His mercy and grace we must change. We must make a decision to go back to our everyday lives striving to walk closer to Christ, to turn from our sinful ways, to live our lives to honor and glorify him, and to love and serve him and others with our whole heart.

My friends, Jesus Christ is here this morning. He is calling you to follow him. He is calling you to have dinner with him. Will you answer his call? How will you respond? Will you respond like the Pharisees? Or will you respond like Levi? Remember, there is not one of us who is worthy. But every one of us is welcome.