

An Invitation to Friendship

Text: Mark 2:13-17

Making friends isn't easy. While meeting people is already at-best an awkward task, moving beyond the pleasantries and chit-chat, and going into actual friendship-building is hard. It was easier to do some years ago, especially in school when there was a common shared experience to start from. Now, it seems that making friends takes a lot of effort. We're busy people. And for those who have lived here for most of their lives, it takes effort just to maintain old friends, let alone making new ones.

Social-media has both helped and complicated matters of friendship. Being “facebook friends” doesn't necessarily mean you actually are friends. You can view online photos of family events, follow people's daily activities through twitter, and know what stuff people like. You can find out their history, opinions, and pet peeves by reading their personal blog. And perhaps, to the joy of many introverts, you can gather all sorts of information about a person without having one single conversation with them.

You think you know them. And whether good or bad, and I believe it's mostly bad – they won't know you.

This is not the type of friendship we were brought up to seek, at least the generation that didn't grow up with internet.

We all have different ideas of what it means to be a friend. And there are different types of friendships. But what makes a friend...a friend? Who do you call a friend?

[Discuss: What are the marks of a friend? Does making friends come easily or hard for you? Why or why not?]

What is friendship? At a very basic level, a friend is “*A person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations.*”¹ Bond of mutual affection. Meaning.. it goes both ways. The feelings of respect, trust, and care are shared equally.

Perhaps that is why we have trouble with understanding what it means to be “friends with God.” It's difficult enough to understand what friendship looks like when it is overlapped with a sense of hierarchy or

1 “Definition for Friend - Oxford Dictionaries Online (US English).”

authority. Any of you who are in leadership roles understand this. Or put it in another perspective, how many of you are friends with your parents, or your boss, or your professors? It's not the same as being friends with your siblings, co-workers, or classmates, is it?

I'm beginning to see, however, that when we are called to follow Jesus as His disciples, we are called to friendship with Him. Perhaps one of the reasons that the Second Person of the Trinity, came in human form, was God's expression of friendship to us. He came to share in our experiences. He came to dwell among us, as one of us. Still, it is a friendship that is like no other. For to be friends with Jesus, means to obey His commands (John 15:14-15). To be friends with Jesus means to know the Father's will.

I used to see God only as an authority. Jesus was, and still, Lord and Savior. But what does it mean to be his friend?

Have you noticed how Jesus makes friends? He certainly met a lot of people, more “friends” than any of us would have on facebook, but not all of them were his friends. His friends were the ones who accepted his invitation. Levi, being one of them.

Levi, also known as Matthew, is a tax-collector, a much despised position in the Jewish community – and not just to the religious elite. Tax-collectors were known to be dishonest and greedy. To be a tax-collector, means to be siding with the Romans, whose conquest was symbolized in the tax system.² To the common working Jew, tax-collectors weren't just “one of them,” but they were aiding the oppressors! To the Pharisees, tax-collectors were unclean, and were lumped in the same category as “the sinners” of society. Though we don't have the same ritual purity laws today, I liken tax-collectors to other collectors today such as parking ticket attendants or traffic officers. Perhaps, and I'm taking a guess here, the social view of tax collector in Jesus' time would have a similar level of disgust that is associated with someone who is a brothel owner or a pimp nowadays.

So, imagine now what that scene would have meant to people; that Jesus, image of the invisible God, invited a tax-collector to be his disciple. Talk about going against the grain. Jesus has already touched a leper and ticked off some religious folk about being able to forgive sins, now he's gone and actually called a despised man to follow him....which also meant this was an invitation to friendship.

² Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*.

As one writer puts it: “The whole plan of salvation is an act of friendship whereby God took on human likeness so that people might take on his likeness, transforming enemies into friends (Phil 2:5–8; Heb 2:17; 1 Jn 3:2).”³

I wonder what went through Levi's mind when Jesus spoke to him. *What?? Me?? Are you crazy, Jesus? Don't know you who I am and what I do? Why? Why chose me?*

It could be that Levi was an honest tax-collector, in that he didn't collect more than he was legally obliged to. It could be that Levi was a kind tax-collector, and forgave many who couldn't pay. Or perhaps he lived up to the reputation of his profession. The writer of the gospel didn't think it was necessary to mention. And neither did Jesus. The important thing was that Levi accepted Jesus' invitation. He left his booth and followed Jesus. A seismic shift just occurred. Levi the tax-collector was now a disciple of Jesus, the Son of God. First Century, Benedictine Monk, historian and Doctor of the Church, Bede wrote, “Following Jesus is a motion not so much of the feet as of the heart.” For Levi to leave his booth and go with Jesus is an outward sign of the change that was going on inside of Levi. Even though the world told Levi he was a reject and scoundrel, deserving of God's wrath, Jesus told him otherwise. Levi's heart, then his feet, responded in kind. Levi wanted a relationship with God, and it showed.

Then something curious happens: he has Jesus over for dinner and invites his fellow tax-collectors and sinners too. Levi invites Jesus into *his* home. Why? To celebrate! To feast!

Before taking a Sacraments course at Regent, I had not noticed the significance of meal narratives in the gospels before. In fact, meals are a big deal throughout the Bible.. because food was a big deal in ancient societies. Food was a tangible blessing from God; it was He who provided food for all. The Bible is rich with imagery of a banquet, or the marriage feast, where He invites us to enjoy Him. Food and meals in the bible are metaphors of the good life that God grants to His people.⁴ They are also significant because they mark divine encounters and, particularly with Jesus, they redefine relationships.

For example, when Abraham in Gen 18 encounters the three strangers, who were angelic messengers, a meal was quickly prepared by Sarah. And after Moses and the Israelites entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders “saw God, and ate and drank.” (Exodus

³ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

24:11). With Jesus, he's constantly eating and drinking with people. And It's not a coincidental act that right before his crucifixion, Jesus hosts the Last Supper.

It's not just about the food; the point is who is at the table. Tax-collectors and sinners. Jesus' disciples and perhaps some Pharisees. And though it was at Levi's house, it is Jesus they were all eating with. He becomes the host of the meal. This is where we feel the Pharisees' indignation, their shock, that Jesus – a Rabbi – would eat with such dirty company. The Pharisees treated their table at home like a representation of the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem.⁵ Therefore they had to maintain ritual purity in their foods and eating companions – they insisted on eating with those with “undefiled hands” (Mk 7:2-4). But Jesus changes that practice. He accepts invitations to a meal in the homes of unclean people. He eats with sinners, and not just eats, but feasts!

The story of the meal at Levi's home is the first example in Mark's gospel of Jesus' “radically open table fellowship.”⁶ Some call it a metaphor for Christian discipleship. By eating with sinners, Jesus crosses another crucial social boundary and makes a point to the Pharisees. It was his way of showing solidarity with the sinners. It was his way of saying, “I'm with them.” Don't we say that a person is known for the company they keep? So what do we say about Jesus for the company he keeps? Would we react any differently from the Pharisees?

And rather than directly asking Jesus, the Pharisees questioned his disciples. But whether he heard them or saw the looks on their faces, Jesus answered the Pharisees:

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

It's a two part answer: The first part is a parable, the second part is further explanation. The meaning is clear. God is with those who need Him. The righteous, those who see themselves as healthy, whole, and complete with the shalom of God... have no need of a Messiah or Savior. Jesus, who likens himself to a physician, goes to those who are ill. And unlike the religious elite who are unconcerned with the unclean – Jesus goes to the sick and makes them well.

⁵ Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

This tells us that God takes our condition seriously. God sees where we are broken, sick, and unwell. God knows how and when we sin. He doesn't leave us there. He doesn't tell us, oh – that's ok – keep on sinning, or keep doing things that hurt yourself and others. No, he wants our healing. That's why Jesus came. He comes to us and invites us to be with him.

The call of Jesus to us is always an invitation to a relationship with him. It's a call into a deep friendship, one where not only do we see Jesus identifies with us, but where we can identify with Him. When we suffer unjustly, when we sorrow over the brokenness of this world, we touch the heart of God. When we share our tables with others, when we forego earthly expectations and reputation to display God's love, we also touch the heart of God.

So what can we learn from the story of Levi? Quite simply, we learn more about who God is and how we relate to Him.

First, God is the doctor... and we are not. It's a reminder that we should not keep people away from Jesus, nor take his place. You don't have to save people. But, give the invitation. Levi asked his friends and colleagues over for dinner to meet Jesus. He didn't wait for someone else to do it – but took the opportunity to do it himself. The Pharisees would have wanted a more respectable crowd – but Jesus would have none of that. He welcomed all.

Second, Jesus calls to you into friendship with him. There is a place for you at His table should you accept it. However, following Jesus is going to cost you. For Levi, it meant the loss of income and a way of life. It also meant living and being with the very people that he might have taxed. It meant facing their judgement, and also indignation of the Pharisees. Jesus says – their opinion isn't the most important. I see you and I've invited you. Come, follow me.

Third, God takes our sin seriously and by taking our sin seriously, it means he takes us seriously. It means that God doesn't just accept how things are, but works to heal the effects of sins. God is in the business of transformation.

All of these things should mark our church. We welcome all those who want to know Jesus, and need him. We want to be friends with one another, like real friends and not facebook friends. It means hanging out and having meals together. It means extending that invitation to people you're sitting next to. This distinguishes our leadership: as elders we're friends with one another; which is unusual for a lot of churches, particularly Asian immigrant churches. But the effort doesn't just come from the leaders, it comes from you too. Like Levi, we are given the responsibility to respond and extend the invitation. And friends, we are in the business of transformation – which is slow and hard work. When you're hurting yourself or other people, it is not ok. When your actions do not match your profession of following Christ – that is not ok; it's a lie to others and to yourself. Allow others to help you, allow God to heal you.

So, the question comes down to: are you friends with Jesus? Is he at your table? And have you extended his friendship to others?

May it be so.

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