

Vicar Mark Moretz

June 25, 2017

“At The Table With Christ”

Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, NC

**Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen**

I have wonderful memories of growing up in a large family...large extended family that is. You see, my mother was the 11th of 12 children in her family. And along with all those aunts and uncles came a lot of cousins.

The whole family congregated at my grandmother’s house after church on Sunday for lunch and fellowship. There were these huge, long tables of food lined up in her large kitchen capped off at the end with a large round table of my favorites, the desserts.

Every Sunday was a special event and it did not end with the meal. I remember my uncles taking naps after the feast, or just sitting out on the front porch. I remember playing with my cousins and exploring in the forest behind my grandmother’s house.

Sometimes we would spontaneously take a road trip to the mountains or some flea market hours away.

It was an all-day event and we usually did not return home until about 9:00 at night after the Sunday evening Disney movie. What a great feeling of belonging.....what a great feeling of being loved.

I also remember going to Church every Sunday. And I remember my parents lingering and talking to friends after the Church service.

I remember thinking, “will they ever stop talking?” because we kids wanted to hurry and get over to our grandmothers house.

But, I also remember Church meals, especially the Homecoming Sunday meal out on the lawn under the huge oak trees. Again with tables and tables of food....and desserts. The adults would be talking and we kids would be playing. What a feeling of belonging....of being loved.

But these are not the warm fuzzy feelings that Levi in our Gospel reading has felt in his life. It’s hard for me to imagine what it would feel like to be an outsider.... Further to be despised.

But first let me make something clear so that there is no confusion. Levi and Matthew, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew the disciple are one in the same person. Matthew never refers to himself as Levi in his gospel account. Also, double names are well attested to in the First Century AD, like Simon/Cephas and Thomas/Didymus, and Levi/Matthew.

But why was Levi despised? Last week Pastor Lew explained about tax collectors and how they bid on the job of tax collector and then would seek to recover their investment as best they could. Such a system obviously would tempt tax gatherers to abuse their office and indulge in greed.

Also these taxes were being extracted by Roman authority and for Herod Antipas the son of Herod the Great. A good Jew regarded them as traitors and unclean by virtue of such associations.

So, Levi was considered a traitor to his neighbors, his nation, his people. Levi missed out on those feelings of belonging. Levi missed out on the love of a Church community.

That is, until this man, Jesus, came to town. This Jesus had recently become pretty famous in Galilee and Judea. Reports have gone abroad about his miracle healings, and great crowds gathered wherever Jesus went to see him, to hear him teach, or be healed by him.

In our Gospel reading we hear Jesus call Levi saying, “Follow me.” I’m sure that Levi was surprised, maybe even shocked, probably thinking “Who, me?” all the while looking to see if there was someone else behind him that Jesus was calling.

This popular “In Crowd Guy”, Jesus, calls Levi, and Levi answers and walks away from his tax booth. And not only does Jesus call Levi but he reclines at the dinner table with Levi and his outcast friends.

This is a big deal that Jesus reclined at table with Levi and his outcast friends. So what’s the big deal about eating a meal together you might ask?

Allow me to flesh that out. Throughout the various peoples and cultures in the ancient Near East, table fellowship signified a high level of friendship and unity.

In the East, even today, to invite someone to a meal is an honor. It is an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness; in short sharing a table means sharing life together.

In Judaism in particular, table fellowship meant fellowship before God. The eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in a meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessing spoken over the unbroken bread.

This table fellowship between Jesus, Levi, and the other sinners is a new meal. It is the inclusion of sinners, like Levi, like you and me, an inclusion in the community of salvation. To them it was the most meaningful expression of the redeeming love of God.

And it's not the first time God has dined with his creation. From the beginning, God was in table fellowship with Adam and Eve and provided fruit trees for food.

In Genesis, God appears to Abraham in the form of three men. Abraham and Sarah show their guests hospitality and prepare a meal.

The covenants God made with his people were celebrated with a meal.

God instructed Israel to use the Passover meal to teach the fundamental doctrines of God, and his salvation to his people.

The sacrificial and liturgical worship at Israel's tabernacle and later the temple involved many kinds of meals. These meals of the Old Testament point to the teaching and eating of Jesus' table fellowship and Christian worship.

Jesus combined teaching and eating to communicate God's kingdom, and his practice of table fellowship gave rise to the classic shape of the Christian Liturgy (the Service of the Word- Teaching and the Service of the Sacrament-Supper). And Jesus' table fellowship also involved forgiveness.

For Jesus to feed his people in the intimacy of the table would call to Jewish mind the rich Old Testament precedent for this practice. And that is why the Pharisees grumble at Jesus' eating with known sinners.

This story of Levi made me remember a story I read about a man named Matt and a time he and a couple of his friends invited a young woman named Kim to a gospel concert.

Matt was hopeful that Kim would come to faith in Christ that evening; however, what occurred was a "train wreck." Here is what happened at the concert during a music break.

A preacher took the stage, and disaster ensued He gave a lot of statistics about living a sinful life. There was a lot of, "You don't want this disease or that disease, do you?"

His big illustration was to take out a single red rose. He smelled the rose dramatically ... caressed its petals, and talked about how beautiful this rose was and how it had been fresh cut that day.

Then he threw the rose out into the crowd, and he encouraged everyone to pass it around. As he neared the end of his message, he asked for the rose back

But by now it was broken and drooping, and the petals were falling off. He held up this now-ugly rose for all to see, and his big finish was this: "Now who in the world would want this?"

His word and his tone were merciless, like the Pharisees in our Gospel reading. His essential message, which was supposed to represent Jesus' message to a world of sinners, was this: "Hey, don't be a dirty rose."

Matt didn't hear from Kim for a few weeks, until one day her mother called Matt to inform him that Kim had been in an accident. Matt immediately went to visit Kim.

In the middle of their conversation, seemingly out of nowhere, Kim asked Matt, "Do you think I'm a dirty rose?"

Matt's heart sank as he remembered the pastor's words, "who would want this rose now?"

But Matt was able to deliver the Good News of Jesus Christ to Kim and tell her that Jesus wants the rose. It is Jesus' desire to save the rose, to redeem the rose, and to restore the rose.

Isn't it amazing that the God of the universe wants to enter into our dirty lives, heal us, restore us, and spend time with us.

Right here, right now God is with us as we worship Him, confess our sins to Him, and receive His forgiveness. And even today, Jesus is with us in His Holy Meal because he wants to forgive us, strengthen us in our faith, and be in fellowship with us.

Table fellowship is still a big deal.... here at Holy Communion....and on Wednesday Night Alive where we break bread together and anytime we share in the blessings of God as his people.

And as I prepare to depart from Hope, I treasure our times at Holy Communion....I treasure the meals we have had together on Wednesday nights and other events at Hope.

I treasure the informal men's breakfast group that I have been able share fellowship with.....I treasure the table fellowship I've had in some of your homes. I treasure the lunch fellowship I've had together with many of you. I treasure the time I have been able to share in the blessings of our Lord while here at Hope.

And that Table Fellowship is a mark of Hope Lutheran Church. It is a way that people can come to the Church and feel the presence of Christ...It is a way that people feel loved here at Hope Lutheran Church. It is a way that people know that feeling of belonging that I spoke about with my great big family and my childhood Church family.

It is a way that Church members can befriend those outside the Church in a Home-Church way. It is a way that the bonds of friendship can be strengthened here at Church.

So, I encourage you to continue in table fellowship with each other. But, I also encourage you to invite your friends and your neighbors into your homes and your table fellowship....and don't forget to invite Jesus to the table with you.

Invite your new vicar into your table fellowship and friendship the way you have welcomed me and he, too, will be blown away by your love. Treasure your fellowship together.....It is still a big deal..... and treasure being at the table with Christ. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses our human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.