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Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Peace Pulpit

When we begin now to reflect on these scripture lessons this morning, we have to adjust our thinking somewhat in order to be aware of why the Pharisees, the religious leaders, were so shocked and upset because Jesus was eating, having a meal, in the house of Matthew, a tax collector. The Pharisees, these religious leaders, described Matthew, a tax collector, a public sinner and he's eating with other sinners.

This shocked the Pharisees. Jesus claimed and was a religious leader and religious leaders, or those like the Pharisees, scribes and the Sadducees and priests, did not eat with tax collectors or public sinners. To them it was a shock that Jesus did. We understand this more clearly if we help ourselves to get a sense of what banquets or meals meant in that culture in which Jesus lived and where he functioned and preached and did his healings.

For the Jewish people, banquets were something very special. They were a sign of hospitality, which was a very important part of their culture. I just traveled in the Middle East and I came to understand that so clearly-hospitality is a great, great virtue for them, something they value very much. They often connect that hospitality with a banquet. One of their greatest values goes together with banquets. But there's more to it than that.

In the biblical tradition in the time of Jesus, banquets were used even in a civil way. If you were sealing a contract, you would often do it by joining together in a banquet-you and whomever you were sealing that contract with. So that made banquets something quite special, but banquets were also connected with

sacrifices in the temple. Sacrifices often were combined with special banquets.

But then also in the Jewish tradition, in the Book of Wisdom, you find wisdom portrayed as a woman, calling people to share her wisdom by sharing with her at a banquet. So this kind of banquet was a way in which you absorbed the wisdom of God. It became a very religious experience. Also in the Jewish tradition, the very sign of the reign of God, when Jesus and others were trying to say what the reign of God will be like, well, it's going to be like a marvelous banquet where everyone will have enough.

Everyone will be filled with the spirit of joy and peace—a banquet where Jesus himself, as Messiah, as son of God, will be the host. So banquets in the Jewish tradition had this very special civic and even more, religious atmosphere connected with them. For the Pharisees, scribes and other religious leaders, you didn't just invite anybody to a banquet. Only those who were worthy to be at that banquet would be invited.

They made clear distinctions. There were those who were excluded—tax collectors, public sinners. You see, a tax collector was someone who worked for the Romans, the occupying power, the people who were despised and hated, and you even became unclean if you worked for the Romans and/or sinners, those who didn't obey the 613 prescriptions of the Jewish law faithfully, totally, they were sinners, not to be welcomed at a banquet where religious people came together to enjoy each other's company, to eat this gracious meal.

Jesus acted just the opposite, of course, and that's why it was so shocking to those religious leaders. They could not understand how Jesus would sit down with someone like Matthew, or as they say, "other sinners," people unfaithful to the law. They rejected Jesus on this account and went to his disciples and asked, "Why does he do this?" Well, Jesus heard about it of course, and knew that they were speaking about him, complaining about him.

So then he spoke up and he explained why he did this. Of course, as we hear in the gospel lesson, there were two reasons why Jesus did it. First of all, he said, "I have come, not to minister to those who are well, but to those who need healing. I have come to minister to people who are sick." As Jesus said, "Healthy people do not need a doctor, but sick people do," so people who are spiritually in need of nourishment and healing, 'I have come for them. That's exactly why I would invite them or accept their invitations to their meals and their banquets.'

Then Jesus also made a very strong point, which is taken from our first lesson today from the book of the prophet Osee. That prophet had cried out, "Come, let us return to God. God, who shattered us to pieces, will heal us as well. God has struck us down, but God will bind up our wounds. Then, speaking for God, Osee says, "Oh, Ephraim, what shall I do with you? Judah, how shall I deal with you?"

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These are names for the chosen people and God is distressed because, as Osee says, speaking for God, "this love of yours is like morning mist, like morning dew that quickly disappears." They were trying to follow God, but their love was something that was very insignificant, or that disappeared very quickly, like a morning mist hanging close to the ground and then is dissipated as soon as the sun comes up.

So God says, because you are like that, "I smote you through the prophets, slaying you by the words of my mouth," but the God who's going to raise them up, as Osee proclaims, says, "It is love I desire, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not burnt offerings." That's why Jesus eats with the sinners and the tax collectors-it's because he's trying to teach through this, what you might call a parable in action. He's trying to teach them that God is a God of love and that God expects us to love as God loves, that's without condition, without limit.

The knowledge of God is what is important, knowing that God is a God of love. It's not burnt offerings or going through the motions of worship of one kind or another. As Jesus said in that Sermon on the Mount, "Even if you're going to the altar to offer your gift and there you remember a brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift. Go first, be reconciled."

See, love-Jesus understood that and he's trying to show this. You reach out in love-that's how God acts, so God wants us to act in the same way. When Jesus quotes those words from Osee, he's making a very powerful point about who God is and how we have to try to be if we're going to follow God. Our second lesson today from Paul's letter to the Romans highlights the same thing, that God doesn't reach out to those who are already good and holy.

As Paul said, "Because Abraham trusted in God, believed in God, God held Abraham to be just and holy." Abraham had developed a relationship with God and it was that, that made Abraham holy, not actions that he did. Paul says, "Because of this faith, these words of scripture are not only for him, but for us too, because we believe in God who raised Jesus, he who was delivered for our sins and raised to life for us to enable us to receive true righteousness."

In other words, it isn't going to be through observing laws, 613 of them in the Old Testament, or by trying to keep ourselves away from bad people, public sinners. That's not how we're going to be made holy. It's going to be if we develop a relationship with God, trust in God-God makes us holy. Jesus is trying to teach this to those scribes and Pharisees who want to exclude people who they call public sinners or namely, tax collectors.

If we learn this message from Jesus, this lesson today, that 'it's mercy, it's love that I want, not sacrifice, not ritual,' there are many ways in which we can apply it to our situation in the world, and especially in our church. Maybe you heard recently, an archbishop in the U.S., who excommunicated a whole group of people. What they were doing was trying to keep their church open and they had obtained a priest in good standing who was willing to celebrate with them, but the bishop did not want that church open.

He had closed it and they were being disobedient, so when they persisted in their efforts, he excommunicated all of them. 'You're no longer worthy to come to the liturgy.' How unlike the way of Jesus that is. Jesus would go and be with those people in their struggle and not push them away. During the past few weeks, there's been a bishop from Australia who has been giving lectures in various dioceses of the United States, about the sex abuse scandal.

He had been the chair of the committee in the Australian Bishops Conference who dealt with this problem. He was concerned to get at the root causes. He wrote a book about it and one of the root causes that he identifies so quickly is the problem of the bishops who are not being held accountable for what they did. Of course, this makes him very wrong in the sight of the other bishops in Australia and bishops here in the United States.

They have avoided accountability and they're threatened by it, so he's not welcome in a number of diocese and he's been told by the bishops, "Don't come. Don't speak in this diocese." Can you imagine Jesus acting that way? If the man is wrong, welcome him, talk with him, be with him. If he's right, listen to him. This is what Jesus is trying to show us, that we have to be open to all people, welcome people, not exclude them.

There are so many other ways in which we must become a welcoming community, a community that is like Jesus, that is ready to welcome sinners, to be with sinners, to be with those who others would think as not worthy. We have to become a church of great diversity, where we welcome everyone regardless of race, sexual orientation, poverty, wealth. We have to be a church of diversity. We have to share our Eucharist, we have to share our banquet, with all who are out there in the world with us.

When we can reach out as Jesus did and welcome tax collectors and sinners into our midst without making judgment, simply welcoming everyone as God does, God says, "I want mercy more than sacrifice; love more than ritual," this is what is very important and this is what we must try to make happen in our communities, in our church, and in our civil society, so that we really become one beloved community, one family of God where everyone is welcome and everyone gives thanks and gratitude for the God who shows them such love through those who follow his son, Jesus.

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