



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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“Low Society”

(Matthew 9:9-11)

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March 8, 2015

“And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinner?’” (Matthew 9:9-11).

COLLECT: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, how lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

A few years ago my family and I traveled to Spain. We stayed in Madrid with the Fernandez family who are wonderful friends. The dad, Davo, was an exchange student in my high school. We've kept in touch. You might recall we had their daughter Sara stay with us for a year during her senior year of high school, and our daughter Stephanie recently stayed with them for the Fall semester while attending a university in Madrid.

We were all looking forward to seeing them, but at the same time, honestly, I had reservations. There's an old German expression: house guests are like fish in that after three days they begin to stink. And it wasn't just one or two of us. All five of us would be staying with them for over a week. How odious and offensive would we become? Moreover, the Spanish economy is struggling. Davo has a good job as a university professor, but at the same time, having five guests in the house for a week would pinch most family budgets.

So, we were excited to see them, but at the same time, a little anxious and determined to be the easiest guests ever. They greeted us warmly at the airport with big hugs and Spanish kisses on both cheeks. I thought to myself, "well anyone can fake it for a time." They welcomed us into their home, and introduced us to their cat, Cheezpah, worst cat ever. (Whenever I got close it would hiss at me.) That same day they gave us a walking tour of the old part of Madrid. And then we came back, and started to settle in. I don't know how she did it, but that evening, Alicia prepared a meal I will never forget.

We sat down at a table covered with a beautiful white

Spanish table cloth embroidered and laced, china, silverware, wine glasses, flowers. One by one, Alicia brought out platters full of food. There were these potato wedges served with a garlic/mayonnaise sauce. There were chopped tomatoes with garlic and olive oil on top of toast. A platter of shrimp, a bowl of Spanish green olives . . . I had no idea olives could be so good. Salad with oranges and olive oil and salt. And jamon iberico which is a leg of cured ham held upright on a wooden rack. It comes from a particular breed of small black pigs that graze in oak groves and feed mostly on acorns. You shave it off as thin as you can like prosciutto and serve it with a baguette and various hard cheeses. Just when we thought we could eat no more, out of the kitchen would come another platter.

There's something very important that happens when people sit down at table together and share a meal. Also, in biblical times, eating together was a way of establishing relationship, a way of communicating even when there are language barriers. If we had any doubts about the Fernandez family and their feelings toward us, our coming to stay with them, they vanished in the clouds of steam from the heaping platters.

One day Jesus saw a man named Matthew and called him to be a disciple. "Follow me" Jesus said. And then he sat down to eat with Matthew and his friends. It was a remarkable thing to do, actually, because respectable people wouldn't be caught dead eating with Matthew.

You see, Matthew was a tax collector and, as such, was rejected by his people. This is how it worked. The Roman Empire had conquered the land and was occupying it. And they had a unique and effective way of collecting taxes. They actually privatized the work. They sold the office and function of Tax Collector to regional brokers who then employed locals to do the dirty work. But they made it attractive for tax collectors. After having collected his quota, the tax collector was allowed to pocket whatever he collected above and beyond the quota. It worked. After all, in the absence of newspapers and computers, how would you know

the difference between the official amount of tax Rome required, and what the tax collector said you owed? So the local tax collector is Jewish, but he has betrayed his neighbors and countrymen by working for the Romans, and becoming very rich along the way. The system was built around corruption and greed. This is why in the Bible tax collectors are characterized as the epitome of sinners. Nobody, in fact, wanted to be seen in the company of a tax collector. Nobody wanted to befriend a tax collector. Yet this is who Jesus recruits to be his disciple. He says to Matthew, "Follow me." Two simple words, but they constitute a remarkable act of grace.

Then things really get interesting. Matthew pretty much lives alone, walks the streets alone, is ignored by his neighbors, lives almost as if he has some kind of infectious disease. But suddenly, someone has reached out to him. Someone has treated him as an individual rather than a member of a despised group. Someone values him for who he is, beneath his role as tax collector, and for who he might become.

Matthew cannot resist. Two words from Jesus and Matthew stands up and walks away from his tax table to follow him. And the first thing Matthew wants to do is have a big dinner . . . to celebrate this new venture. Who does he invite? The elders of the synagogue? Nah, they wouldn't come anyway. He invites his friends – the only friends he has – other tax collectors and sinners. And of course he invites Jesus.

When the Pharisees, the religious authorities see this, they do not approve. "Would you look at that . . . Jesus choosing to eat with *them*! It's a disgrace!" There's an old saying: "Show me your friends, and I'll tell you who you are." Numbered among transgressors like Matthew and his friends, Jesus is finally showing his true colors.

Jesus answers the Pharisees: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not for the holy and blameless, but for

sinner.”

I don't think Jesus is angry at the Pharisees. I think he's mostly sad . . . sad for *them*. They have no idea, no idea how much they need Jesus, and the forgiveness he's come to win. And there is no convincing them otherwise. They think they're pretty good chaps, not perfect by any means, but decent, respectable people, especially when they compare themselves to Matthew and his friends. After all, they don't collaborate with the Roman occupiers. They don't steal from their neighbors. They don't cheat or extort.

When you think you're healthy and well, that's the easiest time *not* to see a doctor. These Pharisees think they are well. A lot of people today think they are well. But they are not. They are riddled with the cancer of sin. C.S. Lewis wrote, "We sin in between bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich." It's true. We sin all the time. In our thoughts, with our words, with our actions, we sin all the time against God and other people. The Pharisees did too. But at least they were better than Matthew and others like him, and so they preferred to think of themselves as good and decent people. They have little awareness of their sin, and so they have little hunger for forgiveness. And Jesus is sad because he cannot be the Good Physician for people who don't feel the need for that.

We get that way too, don't we? We get smug in our self-righteousness, grateful we're not as bad as others, content to be who we are, blind to our own wickedness. We come to the Lord's Supper with little appetite for his forgiveness, because we haven't really done the work of repentance and we end up excluding ourselves from God's grace.

Normally, it's the tax collectors who were rejected and excluded by their own countrymen. But in this text, who's on the outside? The Pharisees of course! Because of their own pride and unrepentant hearts, they have excluded themselves from this table. And it's Matthew and his friends, self-aware sinners who are on the inside, at table with Jesus, God's Son.

Remember, things change when people sit down and eat together. You know that. When you want to befriend a person, you usually do it over food. Diplomats know it as well. When they try to negotiate a peace accord between nations, they pay a lot of attention to the meals. The delegates are wined and dined first class, because things change when people sit down and eat together. It's difficult to be stubborn and unforgiving and belligerent when you're enjoying a magical meal with another human being across the table. A good meal can melt a lot of ice and pave the way toward peace.

And so Jesus sits down to eat with Matthew and his friends, and in so doing he really does show his true colors. He shows them and us how deep and wide and broad is God's love for *every* human being, regardless of who they are or what they've done. He's not just being a nice guy here. He's giving sinners something they really don't have, namely hope that there is forgiveness and salvation even for the likes of them, for low society, for "tax collectors and sinners."

The Pharisees started calling him "Friend of Sinners" (Mt. 11:19). They meant it to be an insult. But in truth, that's exactly what he intended to be: Friend of Sinners. He didn't love sin by any means, but he loved sinners, which means he also loves you and me. And this love for us sinners would take him all the way to the cross. That's where he would be your substitute. That's where he would suffer the punishment for sin, not his own, but yours, mine. That's where he would die for your sins. "The punishment of sin is death" wrote Paul, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). On the cross, Jesus died so you and I can live eternally.

I can honestly say during our whole time with the Fernandez family, there was only one moment when I knew we smelled like rancid fish. More specifically I was the culprit. Alicia and I were, of all places, at a fish market. She was going to teach me how to make seafood paella, a classic Spanish dish. It has a little bit of everything in it, squid,

mussels, prawns and crabs. Of course the crabs came live. Once home, as she always does, Alicia let them scamper around on the kitchen floor for a time while she sliced and diced the onions, garlic, tomatoes and peppers. When everything else was ready, she gathered the crabs together for a good rinsing and tossed them straight into the hot fry pan. (The Spanish have a more honest relationship with the food they eat.)

In any event, back at the fish market, wanting to be a good guest, I manoeuvred my way to the front of the check-out line in order to pay the bill. I had tried on previous trips with only marginal success, but this time, by gum, I was going to do it and not take no for an answer. Alicia saw this unfolding and tried to push her way in front of me, but Spanish grocery aisles are narrow and I am not. I was reaching out to give the cashier the money. Alicia jerked at my other arm and when I looked back, her face was flush and her eyes starting to well and a string of Spanish came out that I didn't understand . . . but it was hot. I threw up my hands in surrender and said "Okay! Alright Alicia! You win." Clearly I had trampled over some invisible line. This meal was special to her, and was meant to be a gift to us, and I think in trying to pay for it, I was actually cheapening it. In trying to be a good guest, I was actually something less.

Similarly, the love and friendship of Jesus cost him everything and us nothing, and he wants to keep it that way. To think we can contribute to our own salvation only cheapens it. Forgiveness and salvation are given us, not earned. There's nothing you can do to help pay for it. He won't accept it. It'll only make him angry. So my advice, learned the hard way, just accept the love and grace and hospitality Jesus wants to give. Don't try to pay for it or earn it. Besides, he's not faking his love for you. It's genuine, and it spans the centuries. So just receive it then with gratitude . . . the love and hospitality and grace of God in Jesus Christ for sinners like Matthew, for sinners like you and me. Amen.

