

I remember family meals when I was young. We each had our place and most of the time each place was filled. The food was good and so was the conversation. Everyone spoke, everyone was listened to, so while our bodies were being nourished, so were our spirits. I belong, I matter to these people. Even after many years had passed, and I was living far away, when I would come home on vacation it was the meals I looked forward to, the being together over food.

We don't just eat with anyone. Go into a crowded restaurant, take a seat at ~~at~~ a table where people are already sitting. Though there may be an empty chair there, there truly is no room. We may share elevators, sit for hours next to strangers in busses or airplanes, but strangers are not often welcomed at our meals.

That is one thing that has not changed so very much in nearly two thousand years. Hear the objection the Pharisees raised to Jesus' action: Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

~~This offended them. It was not right in their eyes. They must have felt~~ ^{they were offended.} ~~that~~ Jesus was one of them, one like them, deeply concerned with doing God's will. Had it been otherwise, they would have ^{neither} ~~noticed~~ noticed nor cared who Jesus ate with. But we know that ~~to at least some of the Pharisees~~ ^{few were so quiet at the dinner table, or have at their table} Jesus was welcome at their table. He was one of them, family, so how could he eat with these others? Sinners, tax collectors?

Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I came ~~to~~ not to call the righteous but sinners.

Who will Jesus treat as family? Anyone who needs him. The tax collectors and sinners came to eat with him. He received them joyfully.

I read a passage like this and then I marvel at how confused and upside down we in the church get. Until a year ago, Lutherans were not officially to be sharing the Lord's Supper with Presbyterians. Then in a national convention, we decided it would be all ~~right~~ right to do so for a year. Now I know

all the concerns about differences in understanding between us and the Reformed Churches. But how could we restrict our Lord's table from others who pray to the same Lord. Jesus said to the Pharisees, Go and learn what this means, and then He quoted God speaking, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

We get all confused about what is important. We want to do everything right, to understand all of the things about God correctly, and we even divide ourselves off from others who do not believe as we do. And we think we are doing it for God.

Just like the Pharisees. They wanted to be true to God. They objected to Jesus because he had so little concern about what God had established. Were not tax collectors daily handling those coins with Caesars inscription on them? Were the taxcollectors not servants of the godless pagans. Certainly out of devotion to God one should have nothing to do with such people.

And sinners. People who were not serious about God's law. If you have to ride on an elevator with them that is one thing, but a godly man does not sit at table with people like this.

I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. It is not the ritual but the heart God is after. I may have an understanding of God that is above all other people, I may know more about the sacrament than anyone else, I may do liturgy just according to the book, and God doesn't care about that a wit. Do I love? Am I compassionate? Are the lonely and the outcast and the broken of body and spirit welcomed at my table as family? God cares about that.

Who did Jesus ever say no to? Only the self-righteous. Only those who were convinced that they had something to offer God that others did not. It means that the only ones in danger of being reprimanded by Jesus are the ones in the church. If we ~~are~~ ever think that we have some claim on God that the sinners and welfare mothers and crooked politicians and corporate executives and extortionists and TV preachers do not, then we are the ones in jeopardy.

A man named Duane Priebe explained it in this way. He would draw two circles on the blackboard. One circle was us, the other them. Anytime I was

or believe that Jesus is with us in a way that he is not with them, then Jesus gets up to walk over to the other group and take his place there. I can't be in the group where Jesus is unless everyone else is in it too. Either I am one of the sinners, like everyone else, or I am at the table where Jesus is not. Either everyone, black or white, male or female, young or old is family for me, or else Jesus is not family for me.

I always like the Charles Dickens stories. In the beginning there is an orphan, a person who belongs to no one. But by the end, the discovery is made that the orphan is family to ~~me~~ the one who befriended her. A great reunion follows.

What God has done in Jesus Christ is to inform the whole world, one by one that we are family. That is our task, to go out and find all the long lost brothers and sisters who from the moment of their birth on never knew that they belonged at our table and we at theirs. So it is that Jesus taught us to pray ~~together~~ together, Our Father, when we speak to God, One Father, all brothers and sisters.

I want to warn you, though, the world does not like such thinking. Pharisees and others killed Jesus for embracing all the sick, Today the world likes to keep blacks with blacks and whites with whites and Americans only concerned about America and men keeping women in their places. ~~kikaxaxaxax~~ ~~waxxayxnaixxkangaxixaxwhakxxxaxkax~~ But in raising Jesus from the dead, God has revealed that Jesus family of sinners and tax collectors is God's family One day that family will have the great reunion with God and Jesus in the kingdom.

Until that day we will seek to open our tables and our hearts to all those whom God gives us to love. Family.