

October 2, 2022

Luke 5:29-32

²⁹Then Levi gave a great banquet for [Jesus] in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³²I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

“Levi gave a great banquet.” A dinner.

Food plays a big role in the Jesus stories.

- Eating and drinking with tax collectors and other deviants.
- The disciples eat grain in the fields on the sabbath.
- Changing water into wine at a wedding.
- The feeding of the five thousand on the hillside.
- The feeding of the three thousand on the plain.
- A foreigner, a non-Jew seeking healing reminds Jesus that even dogs get the food crumbs under the table.
- And, of course, the last supper with friends around the table.

Food plays an important role, because food is essential to life. It is what powers our bodies, makes our living possible. Too often we take food for granted. Our grocery stores are filled to overflowing. Without thinking we make our list and go shopping. Even if our finances are making buying food difficult, we are a long way from the time we had to hunt and gather food to maintain our lives.

Without a doubt food is central to life. Most of us structure our lives around food – morning breakfast, noon lunch, and evening dinner. Each one of us have rituals associated with our meals – what we eat, when we eat it, how it is served. I am not big on change, so when there is a change to one of these rituals, I can feel a little irritated. In fact, my partner informs me, I can present irritated at such times, which can make others in the room feel they might have done something wrong.

Social etiquette, especially around food and how we consume it, plays a big role in relationships, in living in community. Those times I have put family and friends in an uncomfortable position, because I, willingly or unknowingly, presented irritable or made them feel they had done something wrong, can break relationships. It can certainly put a lie to any pretense I might have given to my implying “all are welcome.”

It is no surprise, then, that food and meals are often part of the stories Jesus tells or the setting for Jesus’s interactions with people, such as today’s story of Levi, the tax collector, and his banquet. The focus of this story is who Jesus has chosen to sit down and eat with. It is clearly not an acceptable group, according to the moral police of the day.

Now truth be told, Jesus has been invited to Levi’s table, it is not Jesus who does the inviting. But, if God is fully with and in Jesus, then God, too, sits at the table. And, if Jesus is willing to break bread with this motley crew, then we should be willing too.

This is not so easy, though. There are people in this world who, to use a common phrase, “turn my stomach.” This can be literally true. Some people can be so repulsive to me, I would not be able to hold down food, if I were to consume it

in their presence. In fairness to the Pharisees and their scribes, Levi and his pals probably really did turn their stomachs. They truly could not understand how Jesus could sit with these terrible people, people who used and abused their own people.

The stories of Levi and his banquet, the eating of grain on the sabbath, the feeding of thousands, and so many more food stories teach me several things. There is enough for all; being fed is more important than when, where, and with whom I eat; and, I am challenged by the reality of who is welcome at the table. This last maybe the hardest teaching of all.

This is hard, not because many of the people more conservative Christians refuse to serve are to be welcome at my table. This is what I have practice for decades. It is hard, because those I disagree with, and vehemently disagree with, are also to be welcomed at my table. Even if and when they turn my stomach.

Gays, lesbians, transgendered to be welcomed at this God's table? Not a problem for me.

Westboro Baptist Church? Christian nationalists? White supremacist? Not so easy.

By accepting Levi's invitation or sitting at table with those who did not necessarily follow God's instruction, Jesus was not saying they and their actions were acceptable. In fact, he says he came to call them to repentance; to turning around, turning away from doing harm to people who could not protect themselves.

Jesus understood that each person has a mother, that each person was once a baby – loved, human. He calls us to

welcome each child of God to the table. It is, after all, God's table. We are just the messengers.

But, when we are willing to be God's messengers, watch out. It is not only the ones who are outside our circle of acceptables that might be changed. As we welcome them, we too will be changed, turned around, but only if, by recognizing our own humanity, we are willing to repent and be turned around.

The answer to the sermon title is easy. "Guess who is invited to dinner" – everyone.

Are we prepared?

In God's name, I hope we are. Amen.