

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
“The Man Who Receives Sinners”
Luke 15:1-10
September 12, 2010

Jesus was labeled, rightly, with this accusation, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” It was a serious charge with the gravest implications for the reputation of a would-be messiah. Messiahs’ are supposed to be super-holy and so when you are a messiah, you have to watch who you let near you. Birds-of-a-feather flock together, and all that. If you are super-holy you probably don’t let hardly anyone near you except maybe a few other very holy people who can spread your message. You have to maintain an “air of distance.” You have to be like Moses back then, who was appointed to leave everyone else to go up on the mountain to be with God. God didn’t come down off the mountain to wallow in the gutters with losers.

“He receives sinners and eats with them.” You can hear those shocked words spewing from the lips of those who thought that a man of God, especially a man who supposedly represented God, should not receive sinners nor eat with them, or do anything that might validate the decisions and vices of such people.

The allegation is full of loaded words. He receives sinners. To receive someone is to give someone access to yourself; to admit someone to your friendship and companionship. It is to accept, not reject, something that is offered. To receive is to offer hospitality, welcome, and too, in small or big ways, intertwine your life with someone else. Receive meant to open your heart and life and let someone in with all their baggage.

Jesus receives sinners.

The sinners whom Jesus received were a wide variety of people. Over and over in the gospels we see Jesus in the presence of people who were less than righteous, such as -- the woman at the well had a sordid relationship resume; His dinner companions were sometimes tax collectors; “whoever among you is without sin throw the first stone” is a response He gave to a crowd ready to punish a woman caught in adultery; He touched lepers who were unclean; He healed blind people who were morally suspect. “He ministers” to sinners would have been an easy charge. “He receives them” ramped up the complaint.

To receive someone like this then is to do far more than simply wish someone well, or have a theological position of grace or mercy, or practice a certain distant politeness toward people. It was something more than devising a program to cure sinners from a well-organized distance. To receive sinners is to receive people whoever they are, however they come, to your life. It’s where the line gets blurred between missions and community. It’s when missions moves from being a program to them out there, and becomes a friendship of lives intertwined.

“He receives sinners and EATS with them.” Eating is the representative way of sharing life together. Sharing a meal meant far more than the simple utility of ingesting calories for the energy necessary to do the work of the day. Eating together had social and religious connotations. It meant something to share a meal together. That’s harder to understand for us who can drive to a window, pick up a hamburger, fries, and a coke, and call that a meal. As it has been said, just because you can put it in your mouth and chew, it does not make it food.

For them, eating together was literally a religious experience. For the Jews, eating together was to celebrate their faith, and so eating together had form and ritual that was observed around the table. I’ll always remember how Katy Stokes lit a candle when she served tea. It was a small ritual, but one that tied the meal together with the memory of those that had come before; and the others who had sat around the table, and the stories that were shared, and the mystery of the presence of the Divine that seemed to settle on the room; not because of the flickering candle, but with greater awareness because of the candle. They had traditions like that too back then. Even more, eating meant cleanliness: clean hands, clean bowls, clean pots, clean hearts. It was a way to honor the most important parts of their lives—God’s presence—by sanctifying the most mundane parts of life. Who you share that experience with then had deep significance.

Jesus eats with sinners. Sinners came in all shapes and sizes: people who did dirty things for a living (such as pig farmers and tax collectors); people who did immoral things (such as liars and adulterers); people who did not keep the law up to the standards of the religious authorities -- Samaritans and Gentiles.

A modern-day southern preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, painted a modern-day southern picture of this sort of meal that Jesus shared. I can’t get the image out of my mind. She said . . .

“So, if I were putting together a sinners’ table at the Huddle House, it might include an abortion doctor, a child molester, an arms dealer, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a Laotian chicken plucker, a teenage crack addict, and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers. Did I miss anyone? Don’t forget to put Jesus at the head of the table, asking the young man to hand him a roll, please, and offering the doctor a second cup of coffee before she goes back to work.

If that offends you even a little, then you are almost ready for what happens next; because what happens next is that the local ministerial association comes into the restaurant and sits down at a large table across from the sinners. The religious authorities all have good teeth and there is no dirt under their fingernails. When their food comes, they hold hands to pray. They are all perfectly nice people, but they can hardly eat their hamburger steaks for staring at the strange crowd in the far booth.

The chicken plucker is still wearing her white hair net, and the garbage collector smells like spoiled meat. The addict cannot seem to find his mouth with his spoon, but none of those is the heartbreaker. The heartbreaker is Jesus, sitting there as if everything was just fine. Doesn't He know what kind of message He is sending? Who is going to believe He speaks for God if He does not keep better company than that? (from Table Manners, by BBT)

To eat with someone, to break bread together meant that you received them as friends. For those who ate with Jesus, it often meant they had been welcomed into a friendship that would change their lives. So, we will remember that just a few chapters later in Luke, Jesus comes upon wee Zaccheus up in the tree and tells that cheating, lying tax collector that He will eat with him that night. They do, and the same people grumbled about it -- there He goes again. And Zaccheus emerges from his shared meal with Jesus a transformed person, returning and repaying that which he had stolen from the people. "Today salvation has come to this house," Jesus says, "since He also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of man came to seek and save the lost."

I used the lengthy quote from Barbara Brown Taylor not because I couldn't also picture a certain group of people with Jesus, and paint my own scene in a local diner, but because I knew I had to let someone else set the table with Jesus right in the middle of my sermon. In a way, I had to let Jesus decide who would be at the table with Him so that I had no control over it. I knew I had to join you and be spiritually present to a scene into which I arrived with you, as an observer, and then see how I responded. What I found, as I thought about cutting that section from the sermon several times, is that I didn't like it very much. I didn't like Jesus, even in a metaphorical story, being out of my control, even my rhetorical control. But there He is, seated at that table with those people, and here I come in my imagination through the swinging front door, with the tinted glass and that metal bar that goes across the middle of it. I go past the counter with the cash register and toothpicks, business cards for lawn mowers, painters, and handymen, and that box of gross, supposedly homemade pecan rolls from somewhere. I wave to that table of old men that is always parked in the corner of every diner, everywhere, everyday, drinking coffee, telling dirty jokes, and complaining about the weather and their knees.

And there are two other mostly full tables in the restaurant. There are my pastor friends, with their clean teeth, comparing the latest iPhone Bible apps. And there's that other table. And if there's an empty chair at each, where would I choose to sit?

Jesus had those options. He could have been a very different Messiah. He was wooed and recruited by the various religious factions as a young up-and-comer who was an effective, influential teacher. He clearly could command a crowd. They wanted Him on their teams, and invited Him to their tables. When He rebuffed their advances, when He scorned their theologies, when He unveiled their mixed motives, they turned on Him, keeping a close eye to see who this guy really was, and with whom He would join. The Pharisees wondered if He would be a Sadducee, and

hobnob with the Romans and famous. The Sadducees suspected He might be an Essene, and would withdraw to a cloistered life out in the desert. The Essenes feared He would be a Zealot and recruit warriors to fight His battles. The Zealots suspected He would be a Pharisee and join people whose morals were high, and whose noses were higher.

It is as if they all come into the diner at the same moment: a Pharisee, a Zealot, a Sadducee, and an Essene see the scene playing out before them, and in one voice, a voice of disgust, disbelief, and discovery of the mystery of the politics of Jesus now revealed: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." This was not good news to them. It resolved questions they had with answers they didn't want to hear. Anything . . . anything . . . would have been preferable to that. Maybe it, along with the problem of Rome in Israel, were the only things they could all agree on. This would not do.

The indictment, "this man receives sinners" was announced as bad news.

Jesus does not just receive sinners who have already been reformed.

Jesus does not just receive the dirty who have already been cleaned.

Jesus does not just receive the broken who have already been fixed.

Jesus does not just receive the wayward who have already come home.

Jesus does not just receive the useless after they become useful.

Jesus welcomes us as sinners and invites our reform.

Jesus welcomes our dirtiness and washes us clean.

Jesus welcomes our brokenness and mends us together.

Jesus welcomes our wandering spirits and beckons us home.

Jesus takes our uselessness and gives us an identity and a purpose.

The very religious people are perfectly happy to receive a person who has already been reformed. Jesus receives us in all the ways we are mal-formed, mis-informed, de-formed, unformed, and conformed to the ways of this world.

As it has been said, Jesus loves you just the way you are, and loves you too much to let you stay that way.

And so, God is pictured as a Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep until He finds it and then puts it on His shoulders and carries it home, rejoicing all the way.

God is pictured as a woman who has lost a coin, and she searches for it all night, in the dark, forgotten, abandoned places until she finds it, and then rejoices.

God is pictured as a parent whose hopeful eyes are always on the horizon, waiting, to see a speck come over the hill -- His child come home from the wanderings. In all of it we get the picture of a God who is inordinately concerned with people who are out there all alone -- by their own choices or not, people who are lost --and what God wants most of all is to see their lives changed, and brought home safe.

If they had heard themselves that day, "This man receives sinners," their own words might have invited them to a deeper awareness of God's character and a more honest account of their own need for God. It might have led them to a renewed commitment to joining the Shepherd on His search for the lost sheep, and joining the woman on her search for the lost coin. They might have been more willing to wait with open-armed patience for the one who left home in arrogant pride, but who might return with humble repentance. It might have led them to an awareness, that in so many ways we are all the same. We are all sinners, we are all broken, we are all wayward, we are all useless, in some way we are all lost. We're all feasting at the table of grace.

This is not an occasion to mourn this hopelessly as it is an occasion to name it with truth. This is who we are. It's who we all are. "This man receives sinners" then is not bad news; it is Good News. It is not judgment, but the reason to praise. It is not a scandal for the man of God—it is the character of God revealed. It means we can all pull a chair up to the table and receive the bread broken, and the wine poured by his nail-scarred hands. It means we all are invited to feast at God's banqueting table. There is always an empty chair left open at the table with the one who eats and shares His life with sinners of all kinds, even your kind.

"This man receives sinners." Thanks be to God.