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Scripture: Table Talk - Luke 5 - Grace

As much as my schedule permits, I spend the first Monday of every month in downtown London, helping to serve a meal to a group of about 100 people. It is a highlight in my month. It started a couple of years ago when Carolyn and I joined a North Park community group that volunteers at Ark Aid Street Mission.

One of the people in our group was Wayde Foss who works at the Ark. I have invited Wayde to come and talk a bit about the meal at the Ark. I would encourage you to connect with Wayde if you have any questions about the Ark.

If you were with us last week on the holiday weekend, you will know that we launched our new message series for the summer. It is called *Table Talk*, and it all about meals, the table, Jesus and us. Food matters. Not just for our daily nourishment and sustenance but meals are full of significance. Just think of some of the most importance events or occasions of your life. They probably occurred around food or were celebrated with food. There are few acts more meaningful of friendship and relationship than a shared meal because food connects. Think back on your week and think about the ways that a connection was made through food.

Just this week, I got to know some people new to North Park around a table in a coffee shop. Our neighbours visited family in Montreal and brought us home a dozen Montreal bagels. Carolyn took a meal to a family grieving the loss of a loved one. We had a family friend stay with us for a few nights and she came with strawberries and fudge. Fudge! Just a sampling of the ways we give or receive food in relationship. It connects us with family and even strangers.

If you have had a chance to travel, you have probably experienced that food even breaks through language and culture barriers as hospitality is

extended and relationships are developed, at the table.

But as we also noted last week, food can also have a dark side. Anything that is good can have a dark side if we let it get out of control. I am sure we have all experienced it. I have heard from a few people this week that are struggling with this topic. I just want to remind you that we serve a God who is all about redemption. God can even redeem your negative experiences around the table.

Given what I have said, it may not be surprising that food, hospitality and the table, are deeply biblical themes and at one point in the gospel of Luke, it describes the way that Jesus came to the world as,

Luke 7:34

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, ...”

Jesus, and his followers spent a lot of their time eating and drinking. It was his mission strategy. It was how Jesus did evangelism and discipleship. Around a table, with some fish, a little bread, a glass of wine listening to people’s stories, hearing their heart break, engaging them in life, answering their questions. Challenging them in their beliefs. The meal to Jesus represented something much larger than just feeding a physical hunger. It represented the Kingdom he came to proclaim where sharing lives is significant.

In fact, the Gospel of Luke is full of stories of Jesus eating with people and today we want to turn to one of those stories. So, if you have your bibles, turn with me to Luke 5:27-32.

To truly understand the meal we are going to look at today, we have to have a little background information. As Luke 5 begins, we see Jesus having a series of encounters with people. The first

encounter. Jesus is just hanging out by the lake on a hot day, just like many of you this week. His ministry was just beginning and he helps some guys catch some fish; actually a lot of fish and then extends an invitation to them. *Hey guys, from now on, do you want to catch people instead of fish?* Apparently, Simon Peter, James and John have seen something in Jesus that just compels them to leave their boats, nets, fishing poles, everything and follow him.

Next, Jesus encounters a man with leprosy. Now, there were strict regulations in this Jewish culture about leprosy. A Leper was ostracized from the community. They were not allowed to have human touch because they were deemed unclean. If they came in contact with someone, their disease could spread. In Luke 5, Jesus broke through the leper's personal space and as result broke some Jewish purity laws by extending a hand and touching him. Physically touching him. Nobody had probably touched this man for years. In theory, this action should have made Jesus both ceremonially unclean and susceptible to contracting the disease himself.

But as we have seen with so many of Jesus healings and interactions with people in the bible, it worked the other way around. It was actually Jesus' cleanliness and healing power that "infected" the man. That is the grace of God in action. Grace that welcomes the outcast. Grace that brings about transformation. Suddenly, it isn't the disease that is contagious but the love and grace of Jesus that spreads. Jesus came to the world to do a new thing. Do you understand that?

In his next encounter of Luke 5, Jesus not only physically heals a paralyzed man but he also forgives his sins and that is what gets him into some trouble with the Jewish leaders and law makers of his day and that is important to remember, as we move to our text for today.

Luke 5: 27-28

Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

The fourth significant encounter in this chapter is between Jesus and a tax collector named Levi. He

extends the same invitation to him as he did the fishermen and he gets the same response, Levi, got up, left the scrolls of IOU's, left the tax assessments, left everything behind and followed Jesus.

Don't you wish your tax man would have an encounter with Christ?! But, what was it about this man, that people would leave everything, to follow him?

"Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus says to Levi, a tax collector. Do you understand how scandalous that would have been in this day? Jesus, who through his actions, his healings and his teaching, was starting to stir up talk that perhaps he was the Messiah, the one sent by God himself to save his people. But he had now invited a tax collector to be one of his disciples, to be part of his inner circle. To follow him.

This is shocking.

Tax collectors in our day aren't so popular but in Jesus's day it was even worse. They were seen as extortionists. Tax collectors would bid on and purchase the right to be able to collect taxes for a particular region of the country. There were a number of different taxes that were levied at the time of Jesus. Anything generated above what they needed to pay, was pure profit to the tax collector. So they had incentive to cheat. To inflate the taxes.

Many of them became quite wealthy but it came at a cost. Jewish tax collectors were seen as traitors by their own people because they were thought to be in cahoots with the Romans, who governed the land at the time. They were in partnership with the enemy to shakedown their own people. Tax Collectors had the reputation of being dishonest swindlers and were linked with robbers and murderers as those who generally could not be trusted in this society.

I don't even know who you would equate them with in our society today? Maybe an unscrupulous used car sale person. Notice I said "unscrupulous". I know we have some honourable used car sales people in here, but I am talking about the ones that knowingly sell a clunker but talk it up and sell it for a super inflated price and then don't stand by their product.

They take advantage of the gullibility of others for their own financial gain. Dishonest swindlers. That was the tax collectors in this society.

Levi, maybe better known to us as, Matthew, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was at one time a despicable tax collector. But an invitation from Jesus to follow him, turns Levi's life upside down, which has eternal consequences. Levi leaves this old life behind to follow Jesus.

Who would have thought? But remember, Jesus mission in coming to earth was to do a new thing. Jesus' call to share his life and ministry with this sinful man, Levi, was equivalent to a declaration; *You are Forgiven. A new life is possible for you.* That is the grace of God in action. Grace that welcomes the outcast. Grace that brings about transformation.

Isn't it interesting that the first thing Levi does after giving up his old life and choosing to follow Jesus is to throw a party. He was celebrating and he does it by extending hospitality.

Luke 5:29

Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor.

This word, banquet indicates that this party would have included a rather lavish meal like a wedding feast and the centre of attention at this meal? Jesus. He is the guest of honour. Levi had just had a life changing encounter with Jesus. The one who had come teaching, preaching and healing the likes of which no one had ever seen before, and Jesus had actually invited Levi to follow him. To do life with him. Notice, it is a personal invite, not a mass email or form letter. A face to face invite and Levi can't help but give up everything to respond to that invitation. And he is so overjoyed with his new life that he wants to celebrate.

To have a party and of course, he wants Jesus as the guest of honour so that all his friends can meet the man who changed his life and who knows, maybe they will choose to follow Jesus too.

I mean that is a natural response isn't it? When we chose to follow Jesus, we had a big party too didn't we, invited Jesus so that all our friends can meet him? Didn't we do that? In a sense that is what our baptism celebrations are like here at North Park.

That is why baptisms are so important. It's like a party in the church, where Jesus is the guest of honour and we can invite our friends as we share stories of what Jesus has done in our life and pray that those listening will encounter Jesus as well. That is why we call everyone to be baptised. It's a party in the church!

This banquet that Levi hosted in his home was called a symposium. In our world, we often think of a symposium as a conference but in the ancient times of Jesus, it was a middle class feast or banquet at which participants ate, drank wine and engaged in lively conversation much like we do at parties today. But there was a unique set up at the symposium. The tables were generally arranged like you see at the front here in an open U, called a *triclinium*. The tables would have been lower in that day with couches behind them. The places of honour were generally in the middle table.

At the tables, people reclined, ate and drank as the conversation was steered by the guest of honour. At the symposium, the guest of honour wasn't just celebrated, they were given control of the conversation.

At Levi's home, Jesus could steer the conversation in any direction he desired. Which was amazing because look who made the guest list. Look at the ones Levi invited to the party.

Luke 5:29

Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them.

Did you notice the guest list? Who do you invite to a party? Your friends, right? Who are Levi's friends? Fellow tax collectors because no one else in society would associate with them. They were so despised so they had to stick together. Jesus had around the table with him at this banquet those on the margins of this society. The outcasts. Those who had been alienated and ignored, those deemed to be untrustworthy, the sinners. Luke also mentions some other guests which can assume to be some followers of Jesus and maybe some family members.

But here is the thing that is especially important to grasp.

The way that the tables and couches were aligned, the *triclinium*, with the opening at one end, there was a purpose to that. In this day, the tables for a banquet were often set up in a room or portico of a home that faced out to the street. So, that people passing by could see in and make note of who was sitting around the table, who was invited to the party. Obviously, the intention behind this was to enhance the host's reputation in the community by showing off all the important people that were extending hospitality to and the distinguished guest of honour.

Because remember, who you sat with around a table and a meal in this culture was huge. To welcome and sit with people around a table was to extend friendship, intimacy, unity and acceptance.

Who ate with whom, who sat with whom, where you sat at the table, really matter and had social meaning in the time of Jesus. That is why this meal at the home of Levi was so shocking. No one with any concern for their reputation would have been caught dead sitting at that table with a bunch of tax collectors in this culture. But Jesus is there. Right in the middle of it all, for all those who pass by on the streets to see.

But, Jesus is doing a new thing. His presence here with the tax collectors, especially as the guest of honour didn't just demonstrate his social generosity and sympathy for those who were despised in this culture. It went much deeper. It was an expression of the mission and message of Jesus. The inclusion of those on the margins of society, the sinners, in the table fellowship of Jesus there is the most powerful picture of the redeeming love and forgiveness of God. Do you see that?

It's the grace of God in action. Grace that welcomes the outcast. Grace that brings about transformation.

On any given night at Ark Aid, those on the margins of society gather for a meal. How do we view that table in our city? Would we sit at that table? Would we invite them to our table? Because, we are them, they are us. We are all the same at the table when Jesus is present.

You may have noticed in the picture of the front of the Ark Aid building there is a wall of windows which open up onto Dundas Street, a busy street. Anyone walking by or driving by can look in and

see who is at the table. Who is eating with whom. Would you be okay with that, to be seen at a table, or serving a table at Ark Aid? Make no mistake, Jesus is there. Are his followers?

Remember Jesus has come into our world to do a new thing, but not everyone will be happy about it.

Do you remember how the Jewish leaders and law makers of his day, responded when Jesus healed and forgave the sins of the paralyzed man earlier in Chapter 5? They got upset. When someone was healed! Look how they respond to Jesus sitting in the place of the guest of honour at a banquet in the home of a tax collector, with tax collectors all around him.

Luke 5:30

But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"

"Why do you eat and drink with such scum?" That is the Religious and civic leaders' perspective of what Jesus was doing at Levi's table, he was eating with scum.

Do you know what scum is, *a layer of dirt or froth on the surface of something*. It's disgusting.

What sort of a heart does it take to describe another human being as scum? How did the Pharisees even know that Jesus was eating with this so called, scum? The Pharisees, who were always lurking around when Jesus was present probably peered into the windows looking to catch Jesus in the act, and they think they have him.

You have to feel sorry for the Pharisees though don't you? They don't know, they haven't caught on; that Jesus has come to do a new thing. To turn the old ways of doing things that oppressed and enslaved people, upside down. To redefine who is in and who is out in society. To call those on the margins to come and sit at his table. While the world is condemning them and isolating them, Jesus offers them forgiveness and salvation. A new place to live and to eat, with him.

Let me ask you a question. Who is our world condemning today? Who does our world say is scum? The mentally ill, the refugees, the

immigrants? Are we offering places for them to live and eat in our country, our cities, our church? At our table?

Look at how Jesus answers the Pharisees' disgust, "*Why do you eat and drink with such scum?*"

Luke 5:31-32, This is how he explains himself. "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. ³² I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent."

Do you know what the Pharisees are expecting of Jesus? That he would behave like a doctor, who would avoid sick people!

I had to see my optometrist a few weeks ago, to get fitted for some new glasses and in the process of the examination, she observed that I have a bit of a droopy eyelid. I have discovered that that is the adjective of the middle aged in our world. Droopy. The word to describe us used to be fit. Or trim. Now it is droopy! I have a droopy tummy and a droopy chin. Now I even have droopy eyelids.

My optometrist wanted me to confer with my doctor to see if there is anything they could do. I don't know, a lid tuck! So she sent a referral to my doctor's office last Wednesday. I got a call from my doctor's office on Thursday. I have an appointment this coming Tuesday. That is what a Doctor does. They are in the business of engaging sick people, even people with droopy eyelids, not avoiding them.

A doctor who is asked to avoid sick people, clearly can't not do the work that he has been trained and prepared for. Jesus, the saviour of the world cannot offer the new life that he has for humanity unless he engages those who need him, those who need the life that he has to offer, sinners.

I think Jesus' words are drippy with some irony in this passage. The Pharisees may be in as much need as the tax collectors but they don't even know they need a doctor.

Just as Jesus can't not carry out his God ordained mission without engaging sinners, we, as his followers cannot point people to Jesus unless we too spend time with them.

Which brings us to the table.

If we were to compare the old way of life before Jesus with the new way of life that Jesus came to offer it may look like this:

The new way is gracious rather than disagreeable. Inclusive rather than exclusive. Welcoming rather than unwelcoming. Focused on abundance, (what we have rather than what we don't have) rather than scarcity. The new way rejoices rather than grumbles.

The new way recognizes its need and finds hope in Jesus rather than feeling self-righteous and rejecting what Jesus has come to offer.

Look at these two lists.

The New Way of Jesus is:

- gracious
- inclusive
- welcoming
- abundant
- joyous
- recognizes need

The Old Way of the Pharisees and Religious Leaders, legalism is:

- rigid
- unwelcoming
- focused on scarcity
- grumbling
- self righteous

Think about those lists. Let me ask you:

Which is the way that you are living?

1. As someone who is living in Jesus and the new way that he has come to proclaim?

or

2. Are you living in the old way? The way of legalism and self-righteousness?

And which of these qualities defines life around your table, around your meals? Is your dinner table a welcoming and inclusive place, even for sinners? For those on the margins of society, is your table open? Is it a place that is abounding with joy and thanksgiving? And is it a place where Jesus is welcome and invited as you acknowledge your need for him daily in your lives?

Or is your table hidden and closed. Unwelcoming and rigid, a place of grumbling and self-righteousness where Jesus is hardly ever invited into the meal or the table talk?

When Jesus eats with Levi and the tax collectors, the message is clear. He came for those who are deemed as losers in society, people on the margins, people who have made a mess of their lives, people that are ordinary. People, like you and me.

The only people left out are the ones that just don't think they need Jesus. They are the self-righteous and self-important and sadly that includes a lot of people in our world today.

Jesus came into the world eating and drinking and doing a new thing and that impacted the way those who declared to be his followers, extend and receive hospitality around the table. As I said last week, I think it is time as followers of Jesus that we *bring back the table*, as an open, welcoming and grace filled place, abounding joy.

So, who are you inviting around your table this week, who's table are you going to and who's table are you serving, because you never know where and how Jesus will show up at the table and you never know where and how Jesus will show up in the table talk.

Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

Table Talk ~ Grace

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever volunteered to serve a meal somewhere away from your home? Describe the circumstances. How did that experience impact your concept of hospitality and service?
2. In Luke 5, Jesus has several profound encounters with people. In at least two circumstances, the people left everything to follow him. Has your relationship with Jesus caused you to dramatically change the way that you live? In what ways?
3. After Levi's life was changed by Jesus, he hosted a big party in his home and invited his friends. Have you invited your friends into your life as a Christian? What have been some of the positive experiences you have had in sharing Jesus with your friends and what have been some of the difficulties?
4. Who are the "tax collectors" in our society today? Who are those deemed to be on the margins? What is your comfort level in engaging those who think and act differently than yourself? If you are uncomfortable, why?
5. Have you ever been the guest of honour at a party? Describe your experiences.
6. Do you have an open table or a closed table in your home? Do you host those who think and act differently than you, around your meal table? Is your table, a table of grace? Discuss, what it would mean to host a stranger or someone on the margins of society in your home.

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for opportunities and a boldness to invite someone you don't know as well around your table this summer. Pray also for a willingness to receive hospitality from others that you don't know as well. Consider and pray for an opportunity to serve with family or a friend at a charity or mission that serves a meal.