

Who Hung Out with the Wrong Crowd

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"All Are Welcome" by Father Sieger Köder

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds, and our hearts to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 5:27-32 (NRSV)

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and Jesus said to him, "Follow me." And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

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

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Who Hung Out with the Wrong Crowd

In Richard Rothstein's heartbreaking book *"The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,"* he tells the true story of a University of Pennsylvania professor and his wife in 1954. The couple purchased some land in Swarthmore, a town just outside Philadelphia. They had a dream: develop a tract of twenty-eight middle class homes that would be sold to both blacks and whites. Their goal was to create a safe environment where families of differing races, colors, and religions could live together peacefully.

But the Swarthmore Property Owner's Association had other ideas—they didn't want their town to be a "laboratory" for social experiments. The Association first required the couple to submit a certified engineer's drawing for the housing plan—something that was expensive and never required before. But the couple pressed through and managed to pay the funds to have the drawings submitted. The Association then blocked some of the construction plans, requiring that a costly new sewer system be installed. The two scaled back their plans, to incorporate the new sewer system into the budget. After this, neighbors then sued the professor for unlawfully incorporating a private road into their plan—even though public funds had been used to maintain the same street. Seeing no end in sight, the professor and his wife abandoned their dream.

Property values and similar looking people were the real American Dream—not racial reconciliation.

Jesus had the bad habit of hanging out with and bringing together people who were supposed to be ignored, avoided, or excluded. As Leonard Sweet writes in his book *"The Bad Habits of Jesus,"* Jesus "made friends of sinners and enemies of saints."

Jesus just couldn't resist. Those that the people who lived in religious bubbles avoided like the plague, Jesus had a special interest in. A good self-inventory question for all of us: *Who do we avoid? Who do we judge? Box out?*¹

Whoever they are—go to them. Over and over in the life of Jesus we see that he was drawn to the outcast, stigmatized, unfriended, exiled, labeled, imprisoned, oppressed, and the misunderstood. Are we too drawn to them—or repelled and repulsed by them? Or another soul-searching question:

- How would you be type-cast in a modern-day retelling of this gospel story? Would you play the part of: *the outcasts? Jesus? or the Pharisees?*

Yet another question:

- Imagine those that Jesus might associate with today. *Would we be appalled by Jesus' company? Would we get to know them with Jesus? Or would we walk away from the table and the room leaving Jesus with his friends and our empty chair?*

Thank God Jesus went out of his way to find them and us—leaving his heavenly home to seek and to save the lost. We are the lost. ALL OF US.

¹ Box out: a basketball maneuver in which a player positions himself between an opposing player and the basket to hinder the opposing player from rebounding.

One of the radical things about Rabbi Jesus was that he had a soft spot for wanderers, wafflers, waverers, wayfarers, and waywards. We need to catch up with and catch up to our Radical Rabbi Jesus and all his followers.

When Jesus saw the tax-collector Levi (also known as Matthew) he went straight to him—made a bee-line for him. He didn't flinch or hesitate. Didn't turn the other way. Defriend him. Didn't rant on social media against him. Or call the cops on him. He saw the tax collector sitting at the tax office and gave him an invitation: "*Follow me.*"

Now tax collectors were Jews who worked for Rome and they were despised by their own people. Tax collectors were lumped in with the low-lives of society: the robbers, murderers, and sinners. The majority saw the tax collectors as corrupt, greedy, and traitors. Tax collectors were barred from *even entering* synagogues. Tax collectors had to stick together because nobody else would hang out with them. Lepers, gentiles, prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors—these are the ones that Jesus was drawn to.

Who do you, in the Spirit of Jesus, need to make a bee-line for?

- An African-American male wearing a hoodie and sagging pants?
- An angry and afraid MAGA hat-wearing right winger who's yelling out "white power"?
- An ivory tower liberal MSNBC Democrat?
- A gun-toting Fox News junkie?
- A drag queen karaoke singer?

See them. Get to know them. Sit down with them. Learn about their world. Love them, not lash out at them—like Jesus. You've got to share the table with them if you want to be with Jesus. You have to leave your snobbery and elitism at the door. Because of sin and selfishness, we're all riffraff. We can't pick and choose who is surrounded by Jesus. Don't judge the bad habits of Jesus' bad company.

Jesus broke into surprising people's worlds—touching them, embracing them, hanging out with them, eating with them, and inviting them to follow him. Jesus transformed them.

Jesus also had the gumption to approach you and me. He invites us. He's willing to associate with us and be seen with us! Think about it: Jesus chose a tax collector to be one of the 12 disciples. And as church tradition teaches, Matthew authored the first gospel, the book that kicks off the New Testament. Wow. Jesus is so revolutionary and so...woke.²

And he's telling us to wake up. Telling America to wake up. Pay attention! Jesus extended an invitation and Levi the tax guy followed—wholeheartedly. He abandoned everything, rose up, and followed Jesus—and kept following Jesus.

Like Levi, what do you need to abandon that's keeping you from following Jesus? Levi had the guts to walk away from his past and now was redefined by the Rabbi. He got re-Jesused. It's time for all of us to get back to our roots and get re-Jesused. Christians especially need to get re-Jesused. White

² Woke: alert to injustice

evangelicals—it's time to wake up and get re-Jesused! Our radical Rabbi embraces us right where we are. But he loves us too much to leave us just as we are.

One thing's guaranteed—no matter who you are, you're going to be stretched and uncomfortable with Jesus' people that surround him. Others are uncomfortable with you. For Levi and his friends and Jesus—this new relationship was reason for celebration. Levi invited Jesus to his home and threw a party in Jesus' honor. He invited his only friends—fellow tax collectors. And Jesus jumped at the invitation.

In Luke, there's a very special theme of parties. In fact there are at least nine parties mentioned that Jesus the Messiah attended in this third gospel. The case could be made that the *Gospel According to Luke* is about Jesus going from one dinner party to the next. The party was not only fun, it was spiritual. It was a place of celebration and jubilation at God's salvation. A foretaste of the joy of salvation that will come at the end of time. Aren't you jealous of Jesus, the tax collectors, and others celebrating and reclining together? I've almost forgotten what it's like to be with a group of people. But evidently that used to be done!

So, who were these "others" Luke talks about? The "others" were none other than "those people" "respectable Jews" weren't supposed to hang out with: the sinners, immoral people, the undesirables, the deplorables, and those ritually unclean from consorting with Gentiles. Jesus says invite the others: but when you throw a party, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Luke 14:13-14.

Who are those you would label as "others"? Those are friends of Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes were none too happy with "the others." They didn't want them in the neighborhood. Murmuring and complaining, they said to Jesus, "*Why do you eat and drink with these tax-collectors and sinners?*"

Before going any further, we need to take a closer look at the Pharisees. We first need to be careful of overgeneralizing the Pharisees. It's really easy to beat up on them. To turn them into "the other." But not all Pharisees were bad. Many were good. Jesus ate with Pharisees—which is important to remember. He went into their homes. He associated with them, too. Some Pharisees followed Jesus like Nicodemus. The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. Others looked out for Jesus and warned him about Herod's plots against him. Like Jesus, Pharisees believed in the resurrection and in the afterlife.

In Jesus' day, Pharisees were people of power and status—probably several thousand of them at the time of Jesus. They were considered to be unrivaled experts in the law and were well-respected by the people. They were also separatists, known as "the Separated Ones." That's what the name Pharisee means. One theologian described the Pharisees as having an understanding of "salvation by segregation."

Pharisees sought to separate themselves and the people of Israel from impurity and pagan practices. They were there to make sure everything was up to code. To call their people back to God and tradition and their true identity. Wanting clear and distinct boundaries. They believed that the kingdom of God would be ushered in by a strict maintenance of Jewish identity and customs. But Jesus had a very different plan for how God's kingdom worked. This is why Jesus had so much conflict with the Pharisees. His message was different:

Give up your human traditions, partitions, and exclusions.
Give up your legalism and smug self-righteous pride.
Stop thinking you're smarter than everyone else,
That people different from you are stupid.
Follow me—no matter who you are.
Repent! Change direction, change course.
Do a spiritual and relational U-turn.
Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord.

Repentance is another crucial theme in Luke. Jesus mentions repentance in Mark 3x, in Matthew 7x, but in Luke 14x. Fourteen times! Repent—turn and learn from Jesus!

The Pharisees taught guilt by association, but Jesus taught salvation by association. Jesus didn't quarantine himself from untouchables. He exposed himself to them. There was no snubbing or slighting or shaming going on here. He got curious and took an interest in people. Ate with them.

To the Pharisees in our story, "those people" lived on the wrong side of the tracks, they were off limits, beyond the margins, taboo. Pariahs.³ The devil himself. They were to be avoided.

But to Jesus, "the others" are the poor and the downcast, the least, the last, the left out, and the leftovers, the blessed ones—the very ones that Jesus came to save.

In fact for Luke, *they are* Jesus. Do you love Jesus? "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." You deprive a doctor of his or her livelihood by keeping them away from sick people. Jesus is the same way. These are his people.

But here's the kicker: all of us are sick, whether we're Pharisees or tax collectors. We are "the others" not them. Jesus is actually willing to associate with us! We all need healing from the Great Physician. All of us need Dr. Jesus—every single one of us. If you think you've arrived, you've missed the boat.

Faith starts with believing that you need help, that you need healing—no matter who you are, what news channel you watch, or what political party you identify with, or how long you've been following Jesus. Believe that you need help and forgiveness. A change of heart. That you can't figure it out on your own. Don't be too proud to go to the Great Physician. Jesus dispenses with all membership requirements and credentials and badges, except for one: repentance.

God doesn't tighten his circle, or circle the wagons. He enlarges the boundaries of his people—incorporating not only tax collectors, but you and me!

Jesus chooses you and me as his eating companions. So let's not get in any food fights with each other. Despite the prejudices all of us have, Jesus desires for us to be friends, and to be friends, not enemies, with Jesus' friends. Or as one person said:

"Those who you think are outside the boundaries of Jesus' companionship are the very ones to whom Christ has been sent."

³ Pariahs: outcasts.

To follow Jesus means that we have to have a change of heart. We also have a change of mind. A new way of viewing and associating with others. A new attitude—the mind of Christ.



I'd like to close by taking a closer look at the painting "*All Are Welcome*" by German priest and painter Father Sieger Köder.

Notice that Jesus is invisibly at the center—we only see his hands offering the bread and the cup. Looking at the painting it's almost like *we're* sitting in Jesus' seat with him. The gathered guests are looking at us—Christ in us. We are the body of Christ. We extend his love. Offer the hospitality of food and drink. At the far left are some (literally) sketchy and shadowy figures in the distance—the legalists and separatists who didn't like Jesus' company. They refused to come to the table with Jesus and his companions. They remain distant and isolated in the dark.

On the other wall is a wide-open door and fresh air—a way out to escape the confinement of pride and judgment. The man on the right of Jesus has a broken arm—he has need of the Great Physician to heal his brokenness. He has a special place. The woman sitting next to him is holding her head in her hand. She looks tired or maybe just doesn't have anything to live for. She too has a place at the table. And the person next to her wears glasses—reminding us our vision is impaired—we look through a dark glass. We've been blinded by prejudice or wrong-headed thinking or assumptions about others. Jesus adds another leaf and another chair for him.

A clown has a place directly opposite Jesus at the other end of the table. Is this a reminder that we're fools and charlatans? That we wear masks? Or that God's foolishness confounds human wisdom? That Jesus is a holy fool? Either way, the clown has a place at Jesus' table.

To the clown's right there is a person stooped over—maybe in shame or grief. Downcast and discouraged—maybe someone who has been abused or enslaved. As the Psalms say, "God is the lifter of our head." They are welcomed and included.

Then there's the lady in the red dress and long hair, who perhaps is wearing too much make up. She could represent anyone who feels used and compromised in their lives or livelihood. Again, Jesus doesn't shun her, he invites her to the table.

Finally there's the man whose eyes are hollow. He looks as if he's not entirely there. He too is seen by Jesus. Jesus sees in him what he does not yet see.

Who are you in the painting? Jesus has a place for you at the table. All of us.

Who would you ask to leave the table? Would you leave the table?

Will we sit down next to the tax-collector to our left? Will we sit down by Jesus on our right? You can't have just Jesus and me. Or Jesus to yourself. It's Jesus and us.

Heaven is not segregated. There's no white heaven and black heaven. No conservative heaven or liberal heaven. That sounds more like hell to me. Heaven is integrated, the Kingdom of God integrated—with every tribe, tongue, and nation. And Jesus is at the center.

May it be on earth as it is in heaven.

As Christ has welcomed us, let us welcome one another to the table.

Amen.

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