

# Welcome – Extending Christ’s Embrace

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*The Last Supper*

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds  
by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
that as the Scriptures are read  
and your Word is proclaimed  
we may hear with joy  
what you say to us today.  
Amen.

## Scripture: Luke 5:27-32 (NRSVue)

<sup>27</sup> After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." <sup>28</sup> And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

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

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

### SERMON: Welcome – Extending Christ's Embrace

It was 1990, and Mikhail Gorbachev (who died earlier this week) was the President of the Soviet Union. Much change was going on during this period of perestroika (meaning "reconstruction") and glasnost (meaning "openness") in Russia. And one of the new things was the opening of the first McDonald's in Moscow.

For many months the workers were trained before the grand opening. A key component of the training was how to warmly welcome the customers. This was a fairly new concept to everyone—workers and patrons alike. The way the word "welcome" was translated was this:

"Your arrival is pleasing to us." The lines of Russians waiting out in the cold stretched on and on.

What were they waiting for? Was it Big Macs, Quarter Pounders, fries, and Happy Meals? No. The lines were so incredibly long because no one wanted to leave the McDonald's. They wanted to stay for the welcome. What were people really hungry for? Welcome. "Your arrival is pleasing to us." No matter who you are, Russian or American, we all long for connection and communion.

Scripture is replete with a long line of welcomers—it's at the very heartbeat of our Judeo-Christian faith. It all started back in the Garden of Eden. God created a place for Adam and Eve to be at home, be cared for, and to grow into who God created them to be. Abraham provided hospitality for the three strangers—and it turned out he was entertaining angels unawares. Later in history, God called his people Israel out of captivity to Egypt. He provided manna and quail in the desert and led them to the land of promise.

In Psalm 23 we read: "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not *what?...* want." God provides green pastures, still waters, restoration to our souls, and even a banquet table in the presence of our enemies. Over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures God reminds his people, since he welcomed them, they in turn were to be welcoming to the stranger.

And Jesus followed in this wonderful line of welcomers. Jesus made a place for everyone. Not only the strangers, but the destitute, outcasts, misfits, sinners, and the unclean. Basically, those that society says, "We can do just fine without you." Jesus, rather, would greet them and say, "your arrival is pleasing to me."

Before we look at Levi (also known as Matthew), we need to get a feel for how society at the time viewed tax-collectors. Rome would farm out taxation to the highest bidder. All you had to do was get the needed allotment to Rome, then you could keep the rest. Tax collectors would overcharge the population to fill up their personal bank accounts. These were people who didn't think much of others, but they sure looked out for #1. They were the low-lives, the ones you kept a safe distance from, shady characters like loan sharks, pimps, and drug dealers. One Bible translation says "scum." You didn't want your daughter dating a tax-collector. In fact, they were barred from entrance into the synagogue. So tax collectors had to stick together because they might be rich from their swindling, but nobody else wanted to be near them.

But Jesus did. We read that Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi (who also went by the name Matthew). In the original languages, there's a better translation than the word "saw." It's better to say Jesus noticed Levi or observed Levi. This is a key part of being welcoming—you notice. You really see the other as a human made in God's image. Jesus was paying attention to Matthew. Then he spoke to him: "Follow me."

Levi "got up"—which is the same root word as "resurrection." It's also the same word used earlier in the chapter when Jesus healed the lame man who "got up." Matthew was just sick in a different way. And Jesus helped him back on his feet again.

So Levi "arose," left everything, meaning he left his day job, and followed Jesus. He kept his money, but now he'd use it to entertain Jesus and bring people together to meet him.

Think about this:

- ◆ The tax collector became *St. Matthew*—one of the 12 disciples.

And as church tradition tells us,

- ◆ Matthew composed the first gospel.

Wow. We have to remember how astonishing this is. Thank God Jesus loves tax collectors...and the world.

Levi invited Jesus to his home and threw a party in Jesus' honor. He invited everyone he knew. He wanted his circle of friends to know the joy he felt in knowing and following Jesus.

And this is our joy and calling Immanuel. To throw parties for Jesus and bring others together to meet him. Wherever we go, we give this same message:

- ◆ *Your arrival is pleasing to us.* You matter. We care about you.

We don't write people off. We see the somebody in the nobody—or what someone said of Martin Luther King, Jr.—*He saw us dancing before we could move.*

We do this at our kitchen tables, in fellowship hall and communion tables at church, at school lunch tables, and the water cooler at work. Jesus jumped at Matthew's invitation. Said YES right away. He wasn't embarrassed of him or his friends. Jesus was about open table fellowship. He wasn't worried about being seen with the wrong crowd.

Here's something interesting: Part of "the others" Matthew may have invited were *Pharisees*. It's ironic—the dubious tax-collector welcoming and feeding the righteous Pharisee. Matthew, the tax collector, was reaching out to those that looked down upon him. Invited them into his home. Before going any further, let's be sure not to beat up on the Pharisees too much. Jesus ate with Pharisees. Nicodemus and Paul were Pharisees. Many were good. They are people too, and we shouldn't turn them into "the other."

The name Pharisee means "The Separated Ones." Some went too far in their pursuit of righteousness. They emphasized keeping pure—which meant avoiding unclean food and the wrong people. One theologian described the Pharisees as having an understanding of "**salvation by segregation.**"

But Jesus had a very different plan for how God's kingdom worked.

The Pharisees tended to emphasize "guilty by association." Avoid the tax collectors. But Jesus emphasized "**salvation by association.**" Get to know them, welcome them, hang out with them.

Through his welcome, friendship, and breaking bread with them, Jesus was giving them medicine for their souls. He was helping them recover and find strength, rather than avoiding them or keeping them out. Jesus' message was different:

- ◆ Follow me—no matter who you are.
- ◆ Keep company with me, become my disciple.
- ◆ I'm not ashamed of you.
- ◆ You're accepted, you belong—but get ready for change.
- ◆ Your life will change direction, change course.
- ◆ And to hang out with me, you're going to have to hang out with my friends.
- ◆ Some will be quite different from you.
- ◆ And my friends will be willing to hang out with you, too.
- ◆ Join the party, join in the dance.

And that's just what Matthew did. To celebrate this life-changing decision, Levi threw a party for Jesus, inviting all his tax collector friends. And apparently, he even invited Pharisees. When the Pharisees complained that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus answered,

- ◆ "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Basically: "I didn't come for those who *think* they're already righteous, rather I came for those who know they are sinners." Jesus saw himself as a healer. He came to heal our brokenness. And so, he was drawn to those who were open to their need for help. That's why he came.



I like how the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus described Christ's teaching: *the medicine of salvation*.

When we think we're all good, we don't think we need help—even if we really do. We avoid going to the doctor to our own detriment. But the truth is, all of us have needs and brokenness—every single one of us, from Pharisee to tax-collector and anywhere in between.

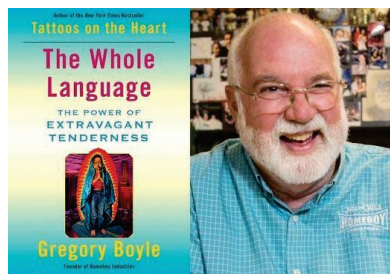
When the doctor helps our ailment, it's an act of service and love, not a judgment. It's a mercy that helps the quality of our lives. You see, Jesus looked at people differently. Instead of seeing a criminal, he would see someone who was hurting. There's a difference.

And when we put on the heart of Jesus, we also offer hospitality and welcome—the healing embrace of Christ, rather than judgment.

If someone has made a bad mistake, we don't point fingers or cast stones. Instead, we offer a hand up, we extend the right hand of fellowship, give a healing embrace, and break bread together.

Extending Christ's welcome will take us to new and sometimes unfamiliar places. We'll talk with others who maybe have different kinds of bumper stickers on their car than we would have. We get to know people who enjoy different music or wear different clothes than us. We'll worship and eat with those who vote differently from us. We won't be so concerned about who we're seen with or if they agree with us.

We'll just be kind and welcoming people, offering what we ourselves already received from Jesus: acceptance and unconditional love and spiritual kinship—what we all hunger for. What we're willing to wait in line for.



To conclude, I'd like to share a moving story that Father Gregory Boyle of Homeboy Industries tells in his latest book *The Whole Language*.

Gloria had been through more devastating experiences than most when she first set foot on Homeboy Industries: abuse, violence, and abandonment.

During one of her downward spirals from addiction, she lost so much weight, she said she looked like a "wet food stamp." When she hit rock bottom, she gazed over a highway bridge, considering putting an end to it all. A car slowly passed, the driver rolled down the window and

yelled, "JUST JUMP ALREADY." Gloria cursed out the car and didn't take the driver's advice. Instead, she decided to go to Homeboy Industries for help.

Gloria was disarmed by the kindness shown by one of the senior staff at Homeboy Industries:

*"She welcomed me like she was waiting for me."* Gloria shared.

*"When I walked through those doors, I didn't have a heart, I had a rock. I wanted to cover my pain instead of feel it. Now I can feel pain. And it's a beautiful thing."*

Near the end of Gloria's eighteen-month internship with Homeboy Industries, she'd experienced a tremendous amount of healing. And she shared with Father G about a dream she had.

In her dream she was dancing with God. But then people started trying to cut in on her dance with God. They were important people, more valuable people, interrupting and trying to cut in...**but God wouldn't let them.** And the two kept dancing the night away.

Gloria and Father G cried together tears of joy, basking in the reality of that beautiful picture of God.

Christian mystic from the 16th century, St. Teresa of Avila, put it this way: *"And only at that shrine where all are welcome, will God sing loud enough to be heard."*

Amen.

Sermon Art: *The Last Supper*, 13th century, Syriac manuscript, The Image Works

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