

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

Have you thought about this.....eating together marks every occasion of our lives.

- It is something instinctively, we are all familiar with.

At our birth there are parties with food.

- Each year we remember our birth with a cake.
- Our Social Ministry Committee this month is having a drive to collect materials for birthday cakes so each child can have a cake on their birthday.
- Confirmation, 2 weeks ago, we had a family and church luncheon for Abby and Isaac on their confirmation.

Each year, about right now, there are graduation parties—with food.

- Christmas Day for most of us includes a large Christmas dinner.
- Have that first big date with the guy or girl of your dreams and it probably includes dinner.
- And if and when the wedding comes, there probably is a wedding banquet or meal.

After almost every funeral, we have a funeral luncheon.

- On and on the list goes.
- Eating together marks every major occasion of our lives.

And it is much, much more than just a way to starve off hunger.

- Eating with other people is one of our most important and basic activities.
- It is a fundamental part of our health, relationships, culture, and well being.

It is a way to build relationships and trust.

- Eating together is about coming together.
- It confirms the sense of belonging, of being part of a community.

Food and eating together and bonding is so much a part of things—that did you know that almost every day of the year has a food dedicated to it.

- And it is not just in the U.S. Many, many countries have this.
- Look it up sometime—it is kind of humorous and interesting.

For us here in the United States, a few of them caught my eye.

- January 2nd is national cream puff day.
- January 24th is national peanut butter day.
- March 14th is national steak day.
- June 26th is national chocolate pudding day.
- July 21st may be very special to us. It is national junk food day.

Well.....you get the idea. On and on the list goes. Almost every day of the year has a food dedicated to it.

- Oh, and what about today?
- There are actually 2 food items designated for this day.
- Today is national corn on the cob day and German chocolate cake day!

Well, eating is a central part of our gathering, sharing, and bonding.

- And it was that way in Biblical times also.
- Eating together was a tangible expression of service, love, and unity.

Today in our Gospel reading we have Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors.

- It is important to back up for a second as to how this all came together.

Matthew was a tax collector.

- That would be a very despised person.
- He is Jewish and yet he is working for the big, bad, oppressive Roman Government.

Just the opposite of what the Jewish people yearned for.

- And, he was taking their money, collecting it to give to and help the Roman Government.
- And on top of it, most of the tax collectors would not only collect what was owed the Government, but they would collect extra for themselves.

And Jesus comes along to Matthew's tax booth and says, "FOLLOW ME."

- And Matthew drops everything that he was doing and follows Jesus.
- He becomes 1 of the 12 chosen disciples.

Well, Matthew is excited about this. Understandably so.

- So, what does he do?
- He throws a banquet and he invites Jesus to the banquet.

Besides Jesus.....who would be there?

- Well, Matthew would invite his friends.
- And who would that be?
- The Bible calls them sinners and tax collectors.

Eating with others does build relationships, unity, and trust.

- And to that end, we sometimes look at and judge people by who they eat with.
- It is wrong that we do this, but it happens.

So and so gets to go out and have dinner with an important public figure.

- Their status goes up.

On the other hand, have dinner with someone considered an undesirable and your status goes down.

- Did you see who he had dinner with?

This was the case with the Pharisees and Jesus eating with Matthew and his friends.

- In our Gospel reading the Pharisees ask, “Why does He (Jesus) eat with sinners?”
- Jesus answers, “It is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy.”
- Jesus says He wants mercy shown, not mere religious ceremonies.

So, who is eating with Jesus? Who would be under this umbrella term sinners?

- The tax collectors are there.
- What’s the sin going on with them?

We could call it greed.

- It could be they held onto money too tightly or money had too tight a hold on them.
- Their lives revolved around getting and keeping money, then buying stuff.

But who else is at the table?

- You and I are at the table as well.

Please look at my object lessons for this message. The two tables.

- The bigger one.
- Matthew and the tax collectors are at this table.
- And you and I are at this table as well.

We've all seen how the rapidly rising inflation cuts into your income.

- You know the damage the rising gas prices have done to your budget.
- The volatility of the stock market makes you worry about investments or retirement accounts.

Your anxiety grows, "Am I going to have enough?"

- When your mind goes there, you begin to hold on to the money too tightly or it takes hold of you even more tightly.
- So, when our Lord calls for giving, generosity and taking care of others, we end up mostly taking care of ourselves.
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans chapter 3 verse 23.
- Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

In the Bible another group that gets lumped under the word "sinners" is prostitutes.

- Now, we know that this sin involves selling one's body for money or acceptance or drugs or whatever.

Phew, I'm okay on this one!

- But more is going on with this sexual immorality.

Do we fall under this umbrella of sinners too?

- Not as prostitutes but we live at a time when sexuality is exposed and explicit for us to see every day of our lives.
- Movies routinely show couples at various stages of intimacy.
- Television shows and commercials tempt viewers about what counts as beauty and what we should look for or how to get satisfaction.

We are bombarded with these images, pictures, seductions, expectations throughout the day, and they infect our desires, our urges, our thoughts, our actions.

- We too, are sinners.
- Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

- Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

What other sinners are at the table with Jesus?

- Those who can't keep the Law with their mouths like they should—or won't keep the Law.
- I can imagine the language used by some of these people at the table with Jesus.
- Filthy words. Coarse talk. Some profanity.

No different today.

- Same kind of foul language flows into our ears and perhaps out of our mouths.
- What do we say in anger when we lose our temper?
- How quickly we lash out with mean words, hateful words, words that God never wants us to speak.
- Hurtful words that appear on Facebook or some other social media about a politician, someone who is different from us, someone who riles us up.
- Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
- Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

Other sinners?

- Those who worry too much.
- Those filled with anxiety about what's going on.
- The war in the Ukraine. Streets that aren't safe. Cars being broken into.
- Not enough police. Afraid of what will happen in a parking lot.

Our Lord calls for us to trust, but we are so deep into worry that we fail to pray, fail to seek peace in His promises despite the dangers we live with every day.

- Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
- Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

Then look over there at that smaller table we have up here this morning.

- The Pharisees are standing off to the side, feeling better than the sinners and tax collectors.
- They are looking down at those who are eating with Jesus.
- A condescending attitude leads them to comparing themselves to those people at the table.

That's a temptation for us too.

- The homeless man sleeping in a entryway door.
- The woman holding a sign at the busy intersection.

- The socially awkward person.
- The public figure who made a mistake and is now being forced to resign.

We too easily judge, too easily stand off to the side, too easily compare ourselves with them to make ourselves feel better.

- Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- Who shouldn’t be eating with Jesus? We shouldn’t be.

Again, I focus your attention to that small table off to the side.

- That’s where I should sit. That’s where you should sit.
- Not at the table with Jesus. Not eating with Him.
- We should be on the outside looking in.
- And yet, Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them! He has invited us to eat with Him.

Now eating at Matthew’s house in our text wasn’t like eating at the food court at a mall, where you’re with your family but you don’t know anyone else.

- Where you go in, get your food, sit alone, eat, and then hurry off on your business.

No, this meal brings people together.

- I imagine the tax collectors knew one another, and possibly the other sinners did too.
- Good food was had, but also laughter and hearty conversation.
- This table didn’t reserve spots for those more important, nor did it leave out those who didn’t fit in.

Everyone was welcome.

- Anyone could sit at this table with Jesus with equal need and equal inclusion.
- When Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, everything changes.
- The table becomes a place of warm fellowship, where no one is better or worse, and the invitation includes everyone.

Something else happened at Matthew’s house.

- It may be Matthew’s table.
- He may have invited the tax collectors and sinners to be there.

But he is not the head of the table.

- Jesus is. Jesus has become the host. He is the One everyone defers to.
- He speaks, and everyone listens.

The Pharisees do not accuse Matthew of anything.

- They question what Jesus is doing at this table.
- And Jesus has taken charge.
- He has welcomed sinners to sit at the table and eat with Him.

Why has Jesus done this? Why this welcome to sinners?

- Because they need Him, of course.
- But also because of His mercy.
- He desires mercy from the people, not mere religious going through the motions.

Yet He also knows that mercy needs to come first from Him if there is to be mercy shown by His people.

- And His mercy flows freely from the sacrifice of Himself.

I repeated a number of times the apostle Paul's words, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

- The sentence doesn't stop there.
- Paul goes on to say, "And are justified by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Think about another meal Jesus hosted.

- This one happened on the night He was betrayed, when He was eating with His closest disciples.
- Even though He knew Judas would betray Him, Peter would deny Him, and the rest would run away, He still welcomed them to the table.
- He ate with them.

Then He heads to the table of the cross.

- He is at the lonely table off to the side of Jerusalem.
- He is abandoned. Left alone.
- He is sitting on the outside looking in at Jerusalem.

What is He doing there?

- He is showing mercy by sacrificing Himself.
- All the greed, all the lust, all the fear, all the anger, all the worry, all the condescension—all of it—He has taken it on Himself.
- Out of all this sacrifice comes the mercy of His forgiveness.
- Like the good physician who knows just what the sick need, Jesus welcomes us in His merciful forgiveness.

Who is eating with Jesus?

- Sinners. Sinners like you and me.
- All because Jesus is at the head of the table. All because He is the host.
- All of us are included. All of us are welcome. All of us are forgiven.

Now its really not the tables I have put up here before us today.

- It's another table. The altar.
- Here Jesus is the host.
- Here Jesus welcomes us with His very body and blood given and shed on the cross for our forgiveness, life, and salvation.
- Soon we will partake of Holy Communion.
- Here we receive the risen Christ who welcomes us once again. We receive mercy from Him.

We leave from this table following Him.

- We leave from this table and that greed becomes more and more a spirit of generosity and giving.
- We leave from this table and the lust and desires become more and more a commitment for that gift of sexuality to be kept sacred in the marital relationship.
- We leave from this table and the worry and fear become more and more a peace that surpasses all understanding.
- We leave from this table and the anger becomes more and more patience and compassion, using our words to encourage someone.
- We leave from this table and we more and more respect another person no matter what his or her place or status is in life.
- We leave here and follow Jesus by showing mercy on Monday afternoon, Wednesday morning, and Friday evening. And all other times in between.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.....

- Picture that moment here today.
- We will gather today at this table of the altar in joy, in closeness, in love, in forgiveness because of Jesus' sacrifice and mercy.

Remember, Jesus is the host, and He says to you, “Welcome to My table.”

- Today, tomorrow, and a feast in heaven for all eternity.
- Amen.

(Please stand) And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Having heard the Word of God we now prepare our hearts and minds to confess the words of the Nicene Creed as found on page 158 in your hymnal.