***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: A TAX COLLECTOR***

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Texts: Galatians 3:26-28 and Matthew 9:9-13

When I was about eight or nine years-old our family hosted Acy Jackson who had been serving overseas and was coming to speak at our church. We all drove to Pittsburgh to pick up Acy and bring him home to eat dinner with us and spend the night. To that point in our young lives, my siblings and I had no contact with any black neighbors in our predominantly white town, but my parents had given little thought to that fact when they invited our African-American guest to visit. So, it was a surprise to all of us when my little brother pointed to Acy and whispered to my mom in the backseat of the car, “He can’t sit at our table.” My mom tried to shush my brother unobtrusively, but he would not be silenced, “He can’t sit at our table.” “WHY can’t he sit at our table?” my mom asked. “Because he will rub off on the tablecloth,” Jim said.

At that point everyone in the car was clued in to the conflict. I started singing, no doubt with holier-than-thou intent, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world…,” but it didn’t help. Finally my mom said to Acy, “May Jim touch your arm to see that you won’t rub off on the tablecloth?” With a broad smile Acy said, “Of course,” and held out his arm. Unfortunately my mom failed to check my brother’s hands before he reached out to Acy, so when Jim touched Acy’s arm and then flipped his palms up they were, of course, covered with dirt – from whatever mess my brother had been in earlier. For my brother, that was proof positive. Acy tried to convince Jim that wasn’t the case, but Jim had his proof all over his hands. It wasn’t until we were all seated at the table and Jim could see that Acy did NOT rub off on the white cloth that his mind was changed. Ironically, years later I worked closely with Acy to start an interracial program house at the College of Wooster where Acy served as Director of the Career Planning and Placement Service. What a small world it is!

*He can’t sit at our table*. Those words of my brother were oft-spoken during years of racial segregation; they had nothing to do with preserving white tablecloths and everything to do with preserving white privilege through racial prejudice. Across the years prejudices have sought to exclude from the table a host of folks who are different, whether by race or religion, sexual orientation or occupation, social class or social lifestyle – as any episode of *Downtown Abbey* will attest! In Jesus’ day those excluded from the Pharisees’ table were Gentiles, lepers, tax collectors, and those identified as sinners, including prostitutes and miscellaneous undesirables. The Pharisees refused to sit at table with any of them, fearing that their own righteous lives would be tainted by the presence of those unrighteous people. They also chided others who crossed the line to sit at table with such sinners, and so with great scorn they took to task Jesus for his willingness to sit and eat with sinners, like the tax collector Matthew.

Centuries earlier Euripedes had spoken words still repeated today: “A man is known by the company he keeps.” They are words of caution for those who might fall under evil influences and words of encouragement for those who might seek more positive role models. There is a certain truth to them. If you pal around with criminals people will suspect a criminal nature. If you spend your time with bigots, people will suspect you of bigotry. If you run with the fast crowd, their values will be attributed to you as well. So, pro athletes are encouraged to break away from the toxic influence of old pals who have unsavory lifestyles into which they might be drawn. Addicts are encouraged to find new friends who will not tempt them to fall back into self-destructive habits. Teens and tweens are encouraged to hang with friends who share their values rather than be tempted by those who might lead them down dangerous paths. Some adults hob nob with the rich and famous in the hope of being considered rich and famous. The choices you make about who you spend your time with and what values they hold make a difference – in appearance and sometimes in reality.

For the Pharisees living righteously demanded excluding unrighteous influences from their lives and from their tables. They had no place for those whom the law judged to be sinners or unclean. In Jesus they saw a man who claimed to be righteous, yet kept company with unrighteous people. He ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, and sinners. He touched lepers and the sick. He dared to offer forgiveness for sins and invited a tax collector to be his disciple. Judging Jesus by the company he kept, they saw an unrighteous man who flaunted the will of God.

Jesus’ response was that those “sinners” were the very people for whom he had come. The Pharisees assumed that somehow they would be God’s favored ones, and any human experience of divine presence would be with them – the righteous. But Jesus kept company with the unrighteous, the outcasts, the unclean, because through him God was reaching out to them with a word of hope, a word of life, a word of mercy. Jesus did not keep company with them to validate the lives they were leading. He reached out to them to offer a better life by encouraging them to forsake their sinful paths and embrace a more faithful future. He shared God’s love with them and offered healing for their bodies and their souls. “I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners,” he said. By his very presence at table with them, Jesus confirmed that they had a place at God’s table, a place in God’s kingdom, a part in God’s plan.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul describes Jesus as breaking down those walls by which people differentiate themselves from one another – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. For a 21st century American audience he might add Republican and Democrat, gay and straight, Protestant and Catholic, conservative and progressive. And in Virginia he might well add with a wry grin: Hokie and Cavalier. All the ways in which we differentiate ourselves from one another fall away in our identification as children of God in Christ Jesus. That is who we are, one and all, children of God in Christ. None are excluded from table fellowship; all of us are called to reach out with open arms to brothers and sisters to let them know that they are welcomed by us and by God.

Christians should be known by the company they keep, not just the company of other Christians, but also the company of those at the margins of society, those in need of the good news of the Gospel, those in tangible need of God’s love and mercy, those for whom Jesus came and to whom he sends us. When is the last time that you sat at table with some of those folks? When is the last time you broke bread with someone unlike you – someone of a different race or religion or life circumstance? I am not talking about playing bridge with a Baptist or sipping a drink with a Catholic friend at a graduation party. But when did you last sit and eat and fellowship with someone the Pharisees would have deemed unclean or a sinner? Have you taken that chance or are you concerned about being judged by the company you keep? Perhaps we should be more concerned about the company we DON”T keep, the neighbors we don’t help, the hungry we don’t feed, the people we exclude from our lives and tables at our peril?

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” That was the question the Pharisees asked the disciples. “Why DON”T you eat with them?” That is the question Jesus asks of us. Amen