

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**11 September 2022**  
**Luke 15 :1-10**

I have written extensively on this parable in two separate blogs, [Here](#) and [Here](#). I encourage you to read these blogs for full context. Today, I want to spend our time together talking about table fellowship during the time of Jesus. This is a very important topic because I believe Jesus completely reinterprets thousands of years of traditions around table fellowship, and these reinterpretations are at the core of his theology of the Kingdom of God. Let's get into our text today. Jesus is the host at a meal. What this probably means is that someone decided to host a meal in Jesus' honor and Jesus was allowed to invite whomever he wanted. The Pharisees and Scribes are there and they don't approve of those people Jesus invited. They say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." At first, the complaint seems petty to us. Who cares who Jesus invites to supper? Why is this a big issue? To fully understand this, we must look into fellowship meal customs in First Century Palestine. Before we do this, let me tell you a little joke. A dietitian was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. "The food we eat today would have killed most of us years ago. Red meat is awful. Soft drinks erode your stomach lining. Chinese food is loaded with MSG. Vegetables can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water. But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all, and we all have, or will, eat it. Can anyone here tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?" A 75-year-old man in the front row stood up and said, "Wedding cake!"

In first century Palestine, to invite someone to dinner was a great honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness. Sharing a meal meant sharing life. Invitations were not given out lightly. After all, the guest is assumed to be bringing honor to the house in which he is entertained. The prevailing wisdom dictated that the righteousness and holiness of the guest was extended to the host family. Associating with a sinner threatened the status, honor, and spiritual cleanliness of any righteous Jew. According to our passage today, Jesus not only eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners, but he also "welcomes" or "receives" them. This is a grave offense and there is more at stake than honor, shame and social respectability. Eating and drinking with these "undesirables" represented a violation of religious uprightness, proper covenant behavior, loyalty to the traditions, and hence to the aspirations of Israel. Table fellowship was one of the signs that showed the world your loyalty to God and country.

The Pharisees attitudes seem to be supported by Old Testament Scriptures, which makes Jesus even more radical in his behaviors. The Old Testament presents special meals to ratify covenants between God and God's people (Genesis 26:30-31; Exodus 24:9-11), for weddings and family celebrations (Genesis 29:22-23), for military victories (Genesis 14:18), for extending hospitality to strangers (Genesis 18:1-8), to celebrate Passover (Exodus 12), etc. There is really no precedent, however, for meals that involve

the table fellowship between righteous Jews and outcast classes. In fact, in Leviticus 11 (prohibitions against unclean foods) and Deuteronomy 14:2 (You are a holy people, God has chosen you!) you begin to see a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles, particularly in the context of meals. When the Pharisees oppose Jesus on religious grounds, they are relying on these biblical and extra-biblical traditions. At the core of Israel's understanding of God is the idea that they are the chosen people. They are distinct and separate from the nations. They and they alone share a covenant with God. They are God's own people and the share most-preferred nation status. Retaining this designation requires them to remain pure by separating from the nations and by avoiding unclean and sinful people within their lands. To act with sinners is to violate the law of Moses, it is to betray the rules of the ancestors, and it is to disrespect God. You can see how radical it is for Jesus to do what he is doing. He is subverting thousands of years of theology and tradition and turning their entire religion upside down.

But those who oppose Jesus also do it on nationalistic and ethnocentric grounds. During the time we call "Second Temple Judaism" (Between 515 B.C. to 70 A. D.) the Jews developed rabbinical teachings on purity laws, meant to separate the Jews from the Greek influences of the day. At a time when their national identity was being threatened, the Jews began to emphasize their distinctiveness from the nations to protect against the advancement of Greek culture: Greek language, philosophy, gymnasiums, Olympic games, symposia (banquet meals where men drank, ate, shared philosophy, and engaged in sexual pleasure, etc.) To be a good Jew meant to avoid the practices of the nations, most especially table fellowship with sinners and Gentiles. It also meant refusing to eat prohibited foods, even at the cost of their own lives (1 Maccabees 1:62-63, 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42, etc.) Most Jews of Jesus' day would still remember their history of the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BCE.) This revolution began because of Seleucid profanation of the Temple (by placing a statue of their Emperor within the Temple proper and demanding worship) and by forcing all Jews to eat pork or be put to death. To eat prohibited food (Leviticus 11) or to eat with foreigners and sinners was unpatriotic. It was akin to giving your back to the nation.

Jesus' actions show a radical love for the outcast as he eats and drinks with average tax collectors (Mark 2:13-17); women of ill-repute (Luke 7:36-50); Roman employees (Luke 19:1-10); dirty peasants in the wilderness (Mark 6:30-44); and even with his own critics, the Pharisees (Luke 14:1-24). These meals with sinners anticipate the great banquet at the end of days when Jesus will host people of every language, every nation, every race, and every social class. Now, remember the reason Jesus gives for eating with tax collectors and sinners: to lead them into repentance and faith. No one is saved apart from repentance and faith in Jesus. For Jesus, table fellowship with sinners was worth re-interpreting Israel's traditions and practices. This is how much God loves sinners! This love is as real today as it was then. Even today, the Holy Spirit leads people everywhere into repentance and a saving faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus continues to eat with sinners everywhere, both as the host at the feast and the very banquet that is eaten.

When you come before this altar today, I invite you to think of the meal served here as the great banquet of Jesus of Nazareth. Today, he welcomes us as his precious guests, even when we are not deserving of his love and his mercy for us. Even though we walk away from God and fail to serve him. Even if we at times become rebellious children who give our backs to God and his grace. Today he welcomes and receives us into his holy presence. Come to him without pretense. Come to him without entitlement. Come to him in humility. Come to him in great joy because he has chosen you and I to be his guests and he treats us as precious children. Jesus Christ died on the cross to save the lost. This meal we will serve in a few minutes is the celebration banquet that remembers his great sacrifice on our behalf. Approach this table with confidence. You are forgiven, you are accepted, you are welcome. There is no longer judgement and condemnation for those who follow Christ. You are the sheep that has been found, come rejoice and celebrate, there is more joy in heaven today over you and I, repented sinners, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. This is our banquet and the host awaits us eagerly.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!