

Meals as Enacted Grace Luke 5:27-31

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When you are a kid,
it matters what party to turn up to.
The coolest kid in the class can have vegemite sandwiches
and everyone will be happy to go to their party.
The awkward kid.
The one no one wants to be friends with.
They can have an unlimited supply of cakes and soft drink,
they can have the party at Timezone
with free play on the videogames for as long as you are at the party.
And still they might have trouble getting people to come.
Which goes to show that a party is not about the food,
it's about the guest list.

Think about it.
This is a question for everyone in the room except Elimelech.
When you get invited to a party,
are you more interested in who else will be going
Or what food will be served?
Parties are about the guest list, right?

In the gospels, Jesus did lots of his ministry at meals.
But you never get a description of what was on the menu.
Unless you want to count the loaves and fishes at the feeding of the 5000.
The dinner parties Jesus went to,
you never find out what was on the menu.
What you do find out is who was there.
And who was there matters.

You see who you will eat with is a sign of who you accept.

We are beginning a sermon series today on the book "A meal with Jesus".

I hope you are able to grab a copy and read it.

It's a book that helps us to understand the importance of the meals in the gospel stories.

Maybe that sounds a bit academic.

But you see who you eat with is an expression of love.

Who Jesus eats with is an expression of God's love.

So it's actually a powerful book about God's love.

The members of our Monday afternoon Bible study

found it something that was transforming for them to read this week.

And that was only the first chapter.

Here's a quote from the first chapter

that tells us about how important meals are.

"It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era.

Mealtimes were far more

than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment.

Being welcomed at table

for the purpose of eating food with another person

had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship intimacy and unity.

Thus betrayal or unfaithfulness to anyone with whom one had shared table was viewed as particularly reprehensible.

On the other hand,

when persons were estranged,

a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation."

Meals are important.

Jesus didn't just do important teaching while he was at meals by what he said.

He certainly did that.

But he also did important teaching by who he chose to eat with.

So let's turn to the meal in Luke 5 that we read about.

Jesus approached a tax collector named Levi and said, "Follow me."

You might not realise it,

but this Levi was also known as Matthew and he wrote Matthew's gospel.

It was a normal thing back then to have a Hebrew and a Greek name.

Levi is Hebrew, Matthew is Greek.

Anyway, Levi is excited to follow Jesus

and he invites a whole bunch of his friends,

and Jesus and his disciples around for a meal.

Not just a meal.

A great banquet.

You might say a party.

The Bible doesn't say anything about what they were eating at the party.

But as we've already said,

the key thing about a party is not what you eat,

it's who attends.

So who attended Levi's party?

Well it was unsurprisingly a whole bunch of his friends.

And if you are a tax collector,

who are your friends?

They are going to be other tax collectors and social undesirables, right?

Birds of a feather flock together and all that.

But bear in mind that though Levi had jumped up from his tax booth

and followed Jesus when Jesus called him,

that doesn't mean his friends had also had massive life conversions.

His friends for the most part

are probably pretty much the same people they were yesterday.

They are probably quite curious

about this sudden change that has come upon Levi.

But they are still a bunch of greedy, worldly folk

that the religious people didn't want to hang around with.
And Jesus went right on in to the party at Levi's house.

There's a big difference between saying,
"I believe in God's grace.
I believe that God can reach out and save people
in all manner of social circumstances."
And acting like you are putting that into practice.
Or to put it another way,
Plenty of people say they believe in God's grace.
That God can reach out and save drug addicts,
prisoners, prostitutes and used car salesmen.
But in practice they would never eat with people like that.
Jesus doesn't just talk about God's grace.
He acts like he believes it.
He turns up to a party at the house of Levi the tax collector.
It is to use the title of our chapter, "enacted grace".
Jesus acts out God's grace by who he eats with.

We need to think about this for us.
Do we say we believe in God's grace
but actually in practice
we are only prepared to associate with respectable people?
Who you are prepared to share a meal with
is a sign of who you are prepared to extend that symbolic acceptance to.
It makes me happy that we run Trinity Tucker
because it means that we share a meal with whoever turns up.
But it's a constant challenge to organise our whole lives
to enact God's grace.

But enacted grace extended towards the tax collectors
is also enacted judgement extended towards the self righteous.

A little bit further on in Luke's gospel, Jesus is invited to another meal. Luke 11:37-38 "When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to speak with him: so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal." Now we need to put aside our notions of hygiene here. This was not mum expecting her kids to wash their hands before dinner because otherwise they will get sick. Hygiene had not been invented yet. This was about ritual purity. The Pharisees had constructed a whole complex system of ritual purity around eating. It was designed to make sure they obeyed the OT law. But the reality was that keeping their rules was arduous. Only the wealthy could possibly manage it. The poor in a slum were never going to be able to keep the ritual food laws. How did Jesus respond? 11:39-41 "Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?" But now as for what is inside of you - be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." Jesus' enacted grace by eating with the outcasts is not being cuddly with everyone. He is speaking judgement on those who construct barriers to keep others out. The Pharisees ritual food purity meant

that they couldn't eat with an outside.
If they did, their cups and plates would become unclean.
They had set up systems that made it impossible for them to enact grace.

This is how Tim Chester says it might play out today.

"Today's Pharisees might condemn the poor
for their dysfunctional families
but not lift a finger to help.

Today's Pharisees might condemn the poor for their excessive drinking
but not lift one finger to ease their pain.

Today's Pharisees might condemn the poor for their laziness,
but not lift a finger to provide employment."

It's not that we are to be in favour of dysfunctional families,
heavy drinking or laziness.

But we can't condemn those things at a distance.

We have to come alongside
enacting the transforming power of God's grace.

Here's another excerpt from the chapter.

Chester says that Jesus is handing out God's party invitations,
to the party in the new creation.

And the party invitations say 'Come as you are'.

The Pharisee's response to say,
'You've got to clean yourself up
before you are worthy of a party invitation.'

But Jesus says, 'Come as you are'.

Now most of us find it tremendously reassuring
that we are invited to come as we are.

There are songs from a century ago called,
'Just as I am'.

But even though we find it reassuring that we are invited just as we are, we sometimes are scandalised that the same standard is applied to others. You mean that he can come as he is too?! We naturally excuse our own faults and magnify the faults of others. Everyone needs to be encouraged to come as they are.

I think one of the biggest hurdles like that in Christian culture is swearing. Many Christians are scandalised if someone swears. But many people in our community swear all the time without even thinking about it. Often there is very little meaning attached to their swear words and no venom or malice behind them. What do you think offends God more, Beautifully phrased and at a surface level totally polite language that has malicious intent. Or rough as guts language that has no malicious intent, it's just somebody's normal way of speaking. God looks at the heart.

Again I remember back to the funeral that was here a couple of weeks ago. The guy doing the eulogy said, "Pig's arse." And then he looked up to God and said, "Sorry". He clearly thought God was more worried about the words, "Pig's arse" being used in a church than the fact that neither he nor the man who was being buried knew Jesus. It's utterly tragic. Why is it tragic? Because this guy will think that he needs to clean his language up before he can come to God. And the reality is that isn't going to happen. What needs to happen is that he comes to Jesus.

And when he does that,
Jesus may or may not decide to do something about his language.
But even if he does,
it will take decades
and many people in the church will be scandalised in the interim.

Enacted grace means that middle class expectations get left at the door.

Well we will jump back to Levi's party.

The Pharisees don't like who Jesus hangs around with.

And they ask him a question.

5:30 "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

What is Jesus' answer?

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Of course there is no one righteous.

The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But Jesus is addressing people as the community views them,
not as God views them.

In the community's eyes,

there are some people who measure up.

And there are other people who don't.

It was the case in the first century.

The Pharisees measured up.

The tax collectors and their mates did not.

It's also the case today.

Some people think they have got it all together.

Other people are well aware that they haven't.

And Jesus is says,

"I have come for the ones who know they don't measure up.

I'm not here for the people who think they've got it all together.

They are kidding themselves.

They won't respond to me.
I am here for the ones who aren't kidding themselves."

I'm going to finish by referring to another snippet of Chester's book.
He tells the story of a movie called "Little Miss Sunshine".

It's about a girl from a dysfunctional family
that is entered into a beauty contest.

I haven't watched the movie yet.

But I'm going to.

It aroused lots of chat in our Bible Study group.

Must we worth a look.

Anyway the movie compares and contrasts two groups of people.

The people from the dysfunctional family
and the people at the beauty contest.

The people from the dysfunctional family
have a way of loving and caring for each other.

They have a belief that no one should get left behind.

The people from the beauty contest are full of jealousy
and surface level values.

And the point is

that even despite the rather obvious flaws of the first group,
they make it because they make it together.

And the church ought to be like that first group.

We are a community formed by enacted grace.

Grace that is not just spoken about but lived in practice.

Jesus is building his church around that value of enacted grace.

He is going to save the tax collectors and sinners,
whoever they might be in our day.

He's in charge.

That's what he's going to do.

We don't have the option of arguing with him.

We can either cooperate with his way of going about things.
Or we can go in the Pharisees direction and find ourselves left out.
But Jesus will establish his kingdom
which is founded on the radical grace of God.