

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: A God-Lived Life (Month 3)
Service Theme: A Life of Hospitality

Sermon Theme: Who Do You Eat With? (April 3, 2022)
Matthew 9:9-13

There are few places in the world that are a better microcosm of human nature than...the high school cafeteria. Remember those days? I've heard it called "the seedbed of stress," because there was so much riding on one simple question: "Who do you eat with?"

Should you sit with the jocks? The nerds? The cheerleaders? The band geeks? The theater crowd? The student council members? The always-in-detention bad boys? That can be stressful for a high schooler because of image. When a young adult is still trying to figure out their identity, image feels all-important. And who you ate with could majorly define your image.

As you stood there surveying your table options, your mind raced. "I can't be seen with people like that. What would everyone think of me?" "If I can sit with them, I'll be in the cool crowd! But...what if they reject me? I'll be ruined!"

You've probably been on both sides of the table. The one desperately looking to belong and be welcomed. And also the one avoiding eye contact with the kid everyone else picks on, because if people saw you eating with them, what would that say about you?

And that doesn't stop after graduation. Would you rather treat your boss, who can promote you, to a nice meal, or the office slacker you always have to cover for? Would you rather be gathered around the table with the movers and shakers? Or the lady who can't get her life together? Normally, we want to eat with the people we think will give us the image we want—people who will benefit us.

But in today's sermon text, Jesus flips "normal" upside down. He didn't eat with the people who could benefit him or boost his image.

Instead, he ate with people who would have the opposite effect...so that he could benefit them! As we see Jesus exemplify *A Life of Hospitality*, we need to ask ourselves, **Who Do You Eat With?** Because who you're willing to eat with says a lot about who you are!

So often, the Bible shows Jesus being so...well, Jesus. So often, he interacts with people in a completely different way than everyone else does. And we see that once again here. The Apostle Matthew writes autobiographically, *"Jesus saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him."*

We see the amazing power of Jesus' call—he called, Matthew followed. But what's even more shocking is *who* he calls. The Jews despised tax collectors. Because they were lackies for the hated Romans, often using their position to extort their own people for their own gain, the Jews treated tax collectors as untrustworthy traitors. The kind of people you wouldn't be caught dead eating with.

But there's Jesus, doing his thing. He comes to this reviled tax collector as he does his nefarious work, and calls him to be his disciple! Jesus could have ignored or hated Matthew, like everyone else did. But instead, he takes the time to talk to Matthew; to care about him; to show him real love in the everyday details of life.

That's a takeaway for us. How many people do we interact with every day without giving them the time of day? How many cashiers, servers, workers, or customers do you interact with, but barely even smile at or make eye contact with them, let alone take the time to learn their name and show them love? How many opportunities to show hospitality and genuine love to people do we miss in the hustle and bustle of everyday life?

Jesus didn't miss his opportunity, and neither did Matthew! Matthew throws a dinner party and invites his friends, including Jesus. *"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples."* Eating dinner elbow to elbow with a gang of tax collectors, and other "sinners" as

well? “Sinners” in this context means anyone whose lifestyle publicly violated God’s will. So, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, thieves, murders, and so forth. The kind of people that being seen with would hurt your image.

But, can you imagine what Jesus’ presence at that table must have meant to those people? Everyone else looked down on them, but Jesus sat down with them. Everyone else hated them, but Jesus ate with them. And that was a big deal! In that day and culture, sharing a meal expressed closeness and connection. While everyone else avoided them at all costs, Jesus drew near to them, no matter the cost to his image. How that must have touched the hearts of those “sinners” at Matthew’s party!

I’m sure we’ve all experienced that empty, crushing feeling of being an outsider who’s excluded. Maybe you’ve spent time alone at the proverbial lunch table. No one joins you, looks at you, or acknowledges you exist. And you tell yourself you don’t care, but really, it breaks your heart.

But then, the most popular kid in school who everyone would die to sit with, pulls up a seat at your empty table. And they talk to you, showing genuine care and love for you in their presence, words, and actions. Think what that would mean to you! Think what it must have meant to those excluded “sinners” when Jesus treated them that way!

And think how we can impact people’s lives by intentionally showing them loving hospitality! What would it mean to a lonely person if you took the time just to be present with them? What would it mean to someone who feels completely unloved and uncared for if your words and actions showed them that you love and care for them? What would it mean to the outcast everyone avoids if you drew near to them, and opened up your life and your heart to them? It might mean the world to them. It might make all the difference in the world to them! It might make all the difference in eternity for them!

Really, that’s our main motivation in showing hospitality to people. Not just to be nice, make them feel good, or feel good ourselves. We

want to show loving hospitality to others, because through it, we can show them Jesus!

The judgmental, self-righteous Pharisees were angry with Jesus over it, disgustedly asking his disciples, ***“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*** And don’t we sometimes have that same sinful attitude? Looking down on others we think we’re better than? Avoiding people because we’re disgusted by their sinful lifestyles? Writing people off as too far gone for God’s Word to do any good?

But Jesus explained how upside down that attitude is. ***“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”***

What would you think if your doctor called to cancel your appointment because “you’re sick”? Or if you came to the ER with a deep wound, and the doctor said, “Eww...sorry, I don’t do blood.” The whole purpose of doctors is to help their patients heal from their sicknesses and wounds! How ridiculous to avoid or ignore people who have the very thing they’re called to heal?

Likewise, how ridiculous if we refuse to show loving hospitality to the “sinners” and unbelievers in our lives, because they’re sinners! We’re missing opportunities to show them the cure-- to show them Jesus. That’s why Jesus intentionally spends time with these sinners, and calls sinners like Matthew to be his followers. Because he came to heal them of their spiritual disease!

That doesn’t mean Jesus condones or ignores their sin. He calls them the sick who desperately need the doctor! Likewise, we can show hospitality to sinners without condoning their sin. To show love and care for a sick person isn’t telling them they’re healthy! It means you love them enough to want to care for their needs!

That’s why Matthew shows such hospitality to his fellow tax collectors and sinners. Jesus had just changed his life by calling him to leave his sinful lifestyle and follow him! And what was his response? He invited

his friends over so they could eat with Jesus and experience his love too!

Sometimes, we can very intentionally show hospitality in order to bring people into contact with Jesus. You also could throw a Matthew party! Hosting a gathering around food and drink that brings your Christian and non-Christian friends and family together, so your Christian friends can shine Jesus' light through their words and actions. A recent study from the University of Oxford showed that when people eat and drink together, ***“their bonds are strengthened, people become increasingly content, and they find an intensified connection to a larger community.”*** Bringing Christians and non-Christians to eat together can show your unbelieving friends that Christians aren't the weird, “holier than thou” Bible-thumper caricatures they might picture us to be. It also gives non-Christians a window into the impact that Jesus has on our lives! And the impact that Jesus can have on theirs.

Other times, our hospitality shows people Jesus, even if that's not our intention. Think of Abraham, and the radical hospitality he showed to three random strangers traveling by his house. His wife made 93 cups of flour worth of bread! He ran and chose, slaughtered, butchered, and prepared a choice calf from his herd to feed them. That's a lot of work, a lot of resources, and a lot of time, all in the name of showing hospitality to strangers. Why did he do that? Because he loved the LORD, who he didn't even realize he was showing hospitality to!

Or look at the hospitality of the early Christians! ***“They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need...they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”*** They spent time together, they ate together, they provided for everyone's needs. Why? Because Jesus' love motivated them to show love to others! That kind of loving hospitality gets noticed. And when they ask why or how you do it, you can point them to Jesus!

The truth is, as much as our social media culture tries, you won't scream someone into believing. But you might love them into believing. Now, I don't mean they'll come to faith because you show

them hospitality. But your gospel-motivated hospitality might lead them to give God's Word another listen, which brings people to saving faith.

As Christians, we're called to love everyone with a radical, sacrificial generosity—not just financially. But with our time. Our presence. Our abilities. Not just for those we know, those like us, or those we like. The Greek word for hospitality literally means, ***“Love for strangers.”*** And we're motivated to treat even strangers like family, because that's the kind of hospitality Jesus has shown to us! He loved us, even when we were spiritual strangers—even God's spiritual enemies! As Paul writes in Romans, ***“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”***

Jesus didn't just sit down to eat with sinners. He laid down his life for the sinners. Jesus didn't wait for sinners like us to clean up our act and come to him. He came to us, even when we were still in our sin, cleaned up our souls with his merciful sacrifice, and called us to follow him in faith. He promises that when we gather together at his holy table to eat this special meal he's prepared for us, he's here with us, to feed and nourish us!

And that perfectly hospitable love motivates us to show loving hospitality and mercy to others, no matter what it might do to our “image.” They don't have to be huge gestures like Abraham's or Matthew's. Sometimes, the smallest gestures of love and hospitality for people are the most meaningful! So over this next month, and beyond, keep your eyes open for opportunities to intentionally show the love of Jesus to others by living ***A Life of Hospitality***.

Who do you eat with? As you survey the open tables, see everyone as an opportunity! Spend time. Be present. Show love. Eat with everyone! Because when you do that, it says a lot about who you are—a blood-bought child of the God who came to heal the sick, and to call the sinners—like us!