

St. Andrew's UMC  
June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26  
"Eating With Tax Collectors and Sinners?"

While I served at my second appointment, I met a reporter of the local newspaper. The reporter was present at our worship celebration and the open house gala for the renovation that the church just finished, and had written an article about the church in the paper.

The reporter grew up in the local area, and he was a young man who graduated from his college only a couple years ago. This was his first job. I happened to meet him on the street sometime after the celebration, and he was genuinely curious about me. He asked why I became the pastor here. So I told him that I received the calling to the ministry, and I responded to it.

"But, he asked, "why this church??" I explained to him that in the United Methodist Church, the bishop appoints pastors to each church. So I am here, I said. That did not seem to satisfy him, for he asked further: "I mean, you are Asian. Why are you the pastor of a church that is entirely Caucasian?" Oh, that.

Okay, I know where this is going. I also know why he was so uncomfortable asking the question. It is a question about race. No one feels comfortable to talk about race in this country. The subject could suddenly become incendiary, you know?

So I asked him, if he was born and raised in this town. No, he was born and raised in the next town. Did you have a friend who is not of your own race in elementary, junior high, senior high, or in college? "No." "Not one?? I asked. He tried to recollect. After a brief, uncomfortable moment, he shook his head. "No."

I asked him, why he thought it was awkward to see an Asian serving a Caucasian congregation. He said that I was different. This was basically a white town, and I was the first person he saw in his life who occupied the pastorate of a Caucasian church. He felt that it would be normal for an Asian person to serve an Asian congregation.

I told him that I am not surprised that he felt that way, because he was raised in an environment that was insulated from contacting members of other races. I told him that the time is changing rapidly, and the society is changing, too. There would be more and more of what he was seeing today. We said good bye to each other, and our ways never crossed again.

Apparently, the young reporter was brought up in an environment where birds of the feather were expected to gather together. Interestingly, that is exactly the way the Pharisees felt about the Gentiles, but for different reasons.

The Pharisees believed that their nation suffered calamities by the Gentiles as the direct consequences of the nation's failure to observe the Mosaic law faithfully. They believed that, by keeping all the laws and observing all the rituals, they could restore their relationship with God, and the former glory of the Davidic kingdom. As their name indicates, keeping separated from the unclean was the key to their goal of achieving the right relationship with God.

Since the Gentiles did not observe the law, they were unclean; those tax collectors, however, were not only unclean, but also sinful: they collected taxes on behalf of the enemy, the Roman Empire that ruined the country. They were the agents of the Gentile enemies.

So, when the Pharisees and the scribes saw Jesus hanging loose with those tax collectors, it bothered them greatly. To the Pharisaic senses, it reflected very badly on the whole rank and file of the religious leaders, too.

This is how Jesus differed from the Pharisees on his views on the sinners and the unclean: Jesus believed that the purpose of his life was to call the sinners to repentance, while the Pharisees could only see condemnation for the sinners. Jesus reached out to those who were considered as sinful and unclean, while the Pharisees rejected them and condemned them.

Jesus saw those sinners and unclean ones as those who are in need of help and healing. We can see that in his commonsensical statement: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.?" Hence, he did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. Any one who deemed himself or herself righteous did not need Jesus, and it is still in effect today.

This intention is consistent with the idea found in the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd would leave the 99 in the mountain by themselves, in order to search for, and rescue, one lost sheep.

As modern Christians, we might want to consider what caused people to become sinners and unclean. Let us investigate: Do you commit sin, if you do not attend the worship service on Sunday? Do you commit sin, if you work on Sunday? Are you made unclean, if you eat with non-Christians in the restaurant? Are you unclean, if you work for the French government?

Then again, are you blamelessly keeping the Sabbath law, if you let your employees do all the work, while you are observing the Sabbath? Are you ritually clean, just because you do not have to do the dirty job such as collecting taxes, in order to make a living?

Maybe, in today's standard, what everyone considered to be sinful or unclean in the past might not be so sinful or unclean after all. Being a sinner may depend

more on which religion or belief dominates the particular society at the time than the actual sinfulness of the act.

Remember the brave Quaker lady who taught math at the California State East Bay, who wanted to insert the word, “nonviolently” in the oath of allegiance? She was fired from her job for that, although she was recently reinstated. She was deemed unpatriotic and unfit for the job at the time, because of her Quaker belief of nonviolence.

The times have changed, and the way we perceive the world and society is changing. What used to be acceptable to the society is no longer so any more: people used to dump garbage and contaminants into streams and landfills. What was considered intolerable could be quite tolerable nowadays: divorce, and cohabitation without marriage, etc.

In the United Methodist Church, it was not long ago, that women were ordained to pastor the local church. Then there began cross-cultural appointments—ministers of one race being appointed to a local church that is predominantly of other race.

Nowadays, the issue is upon the ordination of the gays and lesbians. The United Methodist Church allows the single, celibate gay and lesbian persons to ordination. Our church will continue to deny ordination to “married” gay or lesbian persons, however, by stipulating that no “practicing” homosexuals are ordained. The UMC managed to tolerate women and minorities, but is yet to include the homosexuals in its rank as equal and full children of God.

How about putting a woman in the White House? Right now, we are looking at the prospect of having the first black president. These were impossible things only a few years ago. What is in the future that we would never tolerate today, but we might end up accepting then?

How would you react, if an openly gay or lesbian person, who looks, speaks, and behaves quite differently than the way you are used to, is appointed as your pastor? Would you transfer your membership to another church? Do you believe that only the heterosexual people may be deemed righteous, clean, and spiritual enough to lead anything? Would you vote for a lesbian, black President? Or, would you rather transfer your citizenship to another country?

In the kingdom of Heaven, it is risky to assume one’s own righteousness. Jesus tends to hang around with those whom the society tends to condemn. Jesus did declare that he did not come to associate himself with those who are convinced that they are righteous.

If we truly seek the spiritual maturity, we must embrace the diversity of God’s Creation. We need to learn to eat with tax collectors and sinners of our time,

those whom the righteous people of our time exclude, based on the authority of the law of our time.

The tax collectors and sinners of our time may be criminals who break the law. They may be “unpatriotic” types who protest the government policies. They could be the families who were thrown out of their houses, because they could not pay the mortgages. They could be the regular Joes who suffer, lose health, or even die, because they could not afford the cost, or were denied, of the health care. They are the sinners and unclean ones of today, because they had been rejected, even condemned, according to the authority of the law.

If you cannot pay the mortgage, your house is foreclosed, and the sheriff's deputies put you out. If you cannot pay for the medical care, hospitals will deny medicine. If you made a mistake in the application, the insurance company can later drop you from the coverage. That is what the law allows, and the practice is lawful; but it could be one of the most inhumane things to commit against another human being. It is like you watching some one drown, because the victim did not have the money to pay you for the floatation device you are selling. They are the sinners and tax collectors of our time who had been legally condemned by the authority of the law.

When those who have power want to maximize their profits or perpetuate injustice, they often “legalize” their practice through buying politicians and having them enact the law. Those who claim what they practice is lawful believe in their own righteousness; but they often practice injustice in the name of the law. Jesus saw through this, for the Pharisees condemned and declared sinful and unclean everyone who could not afford to observe the law to the letter. To these law-abiding, self-righteous people, Jesus said: “Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'”

Where there is no mercy, there is no justice. The greedy use the law, in order to legalize their inhumane practices. To Jesus, the strict application of the religious laws and dogmas was not as important as showing mercy to the condemned and providing healing to the suffering. We ask: “Is it legal?” But God asks us: “Where is your mercy?”

Jesus said:

**“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt.5:20).**

Our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, when we practice mercy. Those who practice mercy not only practice justice, but also do God's will.

To eat with tax collectors and sinners today is to minister to those who are condemned by the law and the society—because those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.