Matthew 9:9-13

[9]As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth. He said to him, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him.

[10]As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples. [11]When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

[12]When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. [13]Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Pull up a Chair

I.

Let me take you back in time. Well, for most of you it's back in time; for some, this is you right now, and for a few these days might still be coming. Think back to the high school cafeteria. You walk out of the lunch line with your tray in hand and into the judgment zone. The whole room is deciding where you belong. Which table is yours? Do you sit with the athletes, or the band kids, the artists, or the straight-A students? Or do you, perhaps, risk the table where the "wrong" people gather?

The cafeteria was never really about lunch. It was about image. "What will people think if I'm seen with *that* person?" You chose the table that protected what you wanted others to think about you.

The funny thing is, most people never *really* outgrow that. We just get better at it. The cafeteria table became the guest list. When the boss invites you to dinner, you clear your schedule and go. If the neighbor who can't seem to get his life together invites you to dinner, suddenly you're too busy.

Sometimes you're on the other side of that. You are asked to host. Reasons to say "no" immediately pop into your head: "The house isn't clean enough," "We just don't have the time." Many of the reasons you might come up with are really *one* reason: pride. "I don't really want to be associated with those people." "I have better things to do."

I have been the one standing at the end of the table with my tray, wondering whether I'll be welcomed to that table in the cafeteria. I've also been the one who says: "Sorry, that seat is taken." The same thing goes for my own life after high school. I've been the one who doesn't get invited because I'm not the right sort of person, and I've been the one reluctant to host—for a variety of reasons.

Contrast your cafeteria life and your adult life with Jesus in today's Gospel. "As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples" (Matthew 9:10, EHV).

How many of us would like to sit down to dinner with a random IRS agent? If there's one in the family, he or she might get a dinner invitation, but one you barely know or just met? Not likely. You might feel like anything you say or do might be used against you in a tax audit some day.

In Jesus' day it was even worse. Tax collectors worked for the Roman occupation government. They could stop you at the city gate and unpack every bag on your donkey. Then the tax collector could charge you any fee he pleased. Rome didn't care how much was skimmed off the top, just that they got what they wanted.

Tax collectors were hated by the Jewish people. Rabbis warned the people to stay away from them. So who were their friends? The only people that would have them: other tax collectors and those thought of as "sinners." Only people who no respectable Jew would be seen with.

Jesus is sitting at *that* table. With "those" people.

The Pharisees see it. Their name means "the separated ones." They believed in keeping the right distance from people—especially the *wrong* people. So it is that the Pharisees have a question; a

question not unlike the ones asked in a high school cafeteria. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:11, EHV).

Similar questions have gone through your own mind, haven’t they? *Those* people? The scammer who calls my phone at the dinner hour trying to trick me? The addict? The criminal? The person who has hurt me? Surely there are some who don’t belong at *this* table!

The Psalm of the Day today says: “Look, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1, EHV). That’s what God’s family is supposed to look like. That’s the table he has in mind. We, with our separate tables—our excuses and our “this seat’s taken”—are not it.

So—who gets a seat at the table?

II.

Jesus didn’t argue with the Pharisees, or even defend himself. He just says: “The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do” (Matthew 9:12, EHV).

Think about it. The doctor who refuses to be in the same room with sick people is no doctor. The waiting room is the whole reason the doctor is there. The Pharisees thought they were healthy. They sat in a corner of the waiting room holding their noses at everyone else. The real problem was that they never realized they were sitting in the waiting room, too.

Jesus says: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13, EHV, quoting Hosea 6:6). He quoted Hosea to make the point that God doesn’t want impressive religion that keeps its distance from the “wrong” people. He wants mercy.

Then Jesus goes on: “In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13, EHV). The Pharisees—and we, too—asked “Who deserves a seat?” Jesus’ answer is that *nobody* does. *That* is why he came.

Now look back to the beginning of today’s Gospel. It is easy to skip over the beginning of the account and assume that Matthew threw a party and Jesus showed up.

That’s not the way it happened. “As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector’s booth. He said to him, ‘Follow me’” (Matthew 9:9, EHV). Before the dinner there was a booth. Jesus walked up to a man who had been written off by everyone. There sat Matthew at his desk, minding his own business, counting other people’s money. “Follow me” was all Jesus said.

Matthew didn’t clean up first, or make an appointment. He didn’t promise to pay anyone back. He didn’t bring any credentials. “Matthew got up and followed him” (Matthew 9:9, EHV). The invitation came from *Jesus*. The dinner party was only an echo of Jesus’ invitation.

The same thing happened in today’s First Reading. In Genesis 18, Abraham looked up and saw three strangers by his tent in the heat of the day. “When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and he bowed down to the ground” (Genesis 18:2, EHV). Abraham didn’t know who the three were. He commissioned Sarah to bake bread; with 20 quarts of flour, the reading says. The EHV footnote says that’s 36 *pounds* of flour—that’s a bakery amount, not something to feed three travelers. Meanwhile, Abraham brings in a calf to butcher. He gathers other food and puts it all in front of them, serving them while they ate. Abraham thought he was welcoming strangers. Finally we learned he was feeding the Lord.

The secret is the Lord is the guest, and the Lord is the host. The table isn’t really ours. It never was.

III.

What does it cost to have a table where sinners are welcome?

The Pharisees were not wrong to think that sin matters; they were wrong thinking that *they* weren’t among the sinners in the waiting room. Paul says: “Just as it is written: There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10, EHV). If that is true—and it is—there are no seats at his table for *any* of us. Not for the tax collector. Not for the Pharisee. Not for you or me.

But the Lord didn’t leave us standing in the cafeteria line. He took the one seat where the

holiness of God and the sin of the world could meet. That seat was a cross. “God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, EHV). Not after we cleaned up. *While* we were still sinners. The Father who cannot look on sin turned away from his own Son. The Son was abandoned so that he got what *we* deserved.

Jesus quoted: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13, EHV, quoting Hosea 6:6). Hosea didn’t mean that God doesn’t want a sacrifice; it means he doesn’t want *ours*. The only sacrifice that means anything is the one *Jesus* made. Because of that, God can look at you—tax collector, Pharisee, scammer, lifelong Christian, and say: “Follow me. I’ve pulled up a chair for you.”

In your baptism you were called by name. Your place was saved. You didn’t earn that seat, you were carried to it. Every time we gather around God’s Word, the table is set once again. Today’s Second Reading described the family of the early church. “They continued to hold firmly to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42, EHV). They were happy to be with their fellow believers whenever they could.

IV.

Today is another Sunday in our Stewardship series. You hear that term and you think we will be talking about money. Stewardship certainly *does* include money. But our whole lives are to be lived as stewards of everything the Lord has given us: time, talents, and treasures, we often say. Time, abilities, and money.

Our Stewardship series has mentioned “A life of being a disciple,” “A life lived for others,” and now “A life of hospitality.” All three of them really deal with time and talents.

Everything about your life is to be a life of Stewardship—making the best use of *everything* God has given you. Think about what God has put into your hands: a home, however big or small; a table, however worn; time, however busy; and the message about a Savior, who found a place for you.

These things aren’t ours to *protect* from other people. They’re *his*, entrusted to us. The God who pulled up a chair for us puts them in our hands so that we can do the same for someone else.

Doing that isn’t complicated. It’s inviting the neighbor over. It’s talking to the visitor at church, or the new-ish members you haven’t gotten to know yet. It looks like the coworker who always eats alone, or the widow or widower who’s house has gotten very quiet. It’s the family that has just lost their main income. The person who you have been avoiding because their life is just too messy, and you’re afraid it might be contagious.

Of course, hospitality *doesn’t* mean joining in the sin of others. It doesn’t mean pretending sin isn’t sin. It means setting a table where the sinners can sit close enough to hear about the Physician. You and I can’t produce faith, only the Holy Spirit does that through the Word. But we get to set the table, to open the door, to be the ones who say: “Come in. Let me tell you about my Savior.”

Hospitality is the oldest invitation in the world. It’s the one Jesus has already extended to you. You are welcome here; your seat is saved. It cost him everything, and he did it gladly.

So pull up a chair. Pull up one for the stranger, the sinner, the one you would just as soon not sit next to, because Jesus pulled one up for you. Amen.