

## ***At the Table – Matthew 9:9-14***

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**March 16, 2025**

When we host a dinner party, who are we most likely to invite? When we host dinners, we do so with the intention of having a good time. And having a good time at dinner means having people at the table we really like.

Dinners at the holidays don't always follow that script. At holidays, we include family we might not otherwise spend a whole lot of time with or have a lot in common with. But they're family, and they need to be invited. It says a lot about the importance of family when they get a blanket invitation to our tables strictly because we're related to them. The bonds of family reign supreme much of the time.

But for a dinner party that's not a special occasion, one that doesn't need obligatory family invitations, we generally shoot for our friends. Or, if not our friends, people at our tables that we have much in common with or want to know better.

Laura and I had dinner a week or so ago with some friends and spent nearly three hours at the table with them. And the time passed by so quickly that we wouldn't have guessed it to have been that long.

It's over a meal that we form connections, and when the meal is with somebody with whom we share common experiences, interests, or values, it's usually a really good time.

How often do we choose people to dine with whom we don't share similarities with? Not very often. And when those differences are stark, there's usually not much of a chance the dinner is going to happen.

When I was in college, I remember watching the 1967 movie "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" during a freshman seminar class.

It starred Spencer Tracy in his final movie role, Katherine Hepburn, and Sydney Poitier. And it was the story of a young white woman bringing home her black fiancé to meet her parents. The film wrestled with the difficult time this white couple had with the prospect of their daughter marrying a black man. And it focused light on the whole topic of interracial marriage, at a time when many states in the U.S. still forbid it by law.

At the end of the movie, while citing the challenges the young couple would face, the young woman's dad, played by Spencer Tracy, gave his blessing to them. In the living room of their home, he says to the young couple: "As for you two and the problems you're going to have, they seem almost unimaginable. But you'll have no problem with me. You're two wonderful people who happened to fall in love and happen to have a pigmentation problem. And I think that now, no matter what kind of a case some [one] could make against your getting married, there would be only one thing worse if, knowing what you two are, knowing what you two have, and knowing what you two feel, you didn't get married."

And at that point, Tracy's character exclaims to their housekeeper, "When are we gonna get some dinner?!"

And everybody gets up from their chairs and moves into the dining room for a meal. The tension has been alleviated, and this multiracial group sits down at the table to cement bonds over what now unites them.

I thought of this movie this week as we focus in on a meal that Jesus shares with people his closest followers didn't think he should be sharing it with.

He deliberately eats with a group of sinners. Now, all humans are sinners, of course. But in this case, "sinners" were referred to as those who were the outcast, namely in this case the tax collectors—Matthew in particular.

"What exactly was the problem with tax collectors? Scholars today tell us that collecting taxes for the region of Judea or Galilee, for example, would be put out to bid. The one who won the bid hired others who lived in various villages or towns to collect the tax revenue from their neighbors. Rome specified how much it expected in net revenue, but it was understood that the various tax collectors along the way could "gross up" the taxes as their fees. Obviously, this system was ripe for exploitation, but it was exacerbated by the fact that the tax ultimately was going to Rome. Thus, tax collectors were widely seen as traitors to their own people." (*Meeting Jesus at the Table*, p. 21)

Matthew, the toll collector, was one of these people—viewed as one of the sinners. And, Jesus walks up to his toll booth in chapter 9, and calls him to follow. And Matthew does, and then Jesus shows up at Matthew's house and eats with Matthew and his fellow tax collectors.

You know, Jesus has many harsh words to say in the gospel of Matthew, but he directs none of them at sinners. His inaugural message is a call to repent (4:17), and he denounces the cities he has visited for failing to repent (11:20-21; 12:41). He pronounces woe against the scribes and the Pharisees (chapter 23). But in the First Gospel Jesus not once denounces sinners. He does not

criticize them. He does not demand their repentance. He simply eats and drinks with them.

And that's what he does here with Matthew: simply eats and drinks with him and his buddies—at the table.

Jesus, most likely, wasn't buddies with them. He may have determined he didn't have much in common with Matthew. But he calls Matthew to be a disciple and then dines with him and his friends. That was pretty radical.

We should be as welcoming as Jesus was; we should not hesitate to pull up a chair to the table of someone with whom we don't have common interests or lineages.

Any of us, though, who've been forced to eat in a crowded room with limited seating at an event knows the discomfort that comes from sitting down beside somebody you don't know. It's hard to feel welcomed and hard to be welcoming.

Jesus is our model, though. He personally demonstrated radical hospitality, and he offers us hospitality when we come together at the table.

When we gather at his table, there is no longer, as the apostle Paul put it, "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For we are all one in Christ." And we're all welcome at this table and therefore welcome to dine on the grace and mercy he offers at this table and in this community.