

She put her head down, as if ashamed. "How do I do it, Jennifer?" she asked. "Do what?" I asked. "Visit someone in prison." "What do you mean?" I inquired. "It's so awkward. I'm only going because I know this guy's parents. I'm not his pastor. What are we going to talk about?" "Talk about the weather- that's what most people do," I quipped. I'm not a very good friend. My friend and colleague was honestly seeking my advice on how to be less awkward when visiting a person in prison. She was asking me because I had served as a chaplain at Metro State Women's Prison in Atlanta. She was asking me how NOT to be awkward or uncomfortable. And the truth is that there's no way through discomfort except by being awkward. My friend had never been to visit someone in jail. My friend, who is white and in her mid 50s at the time was going to meet with a 20 year old black male, who had been accused of murder. To say my rule-following friend was uncomfortable would be an understatement. However, she is an excellent pastor, and she went on to the prison. Once inside she could not see this guy because he was in solitary confinement so she sat in front of a computer screen and spoke with him. They talked about the weather at first, which was really awkward, and then they moved on to music. When asked her favorite type of music, my friend answered, "Hymns" to which he answered "rap." Awkward. Then they moved on to sports. My friend loves baseball and began talking a hundred miles per hour about baseball. The guy waited for her to come up for air and then responded that he really wasn't a baseball fan but was really interested in the NBA draft. Awkward again. My friend, who had never watched the draft, went home, found out when it was on TV and then watched it taking copious notes. The next time she went back to the prison to visit him and this time she knew she could have nothing on her person, not even a piece of paper, so she wrote the draft

information down her arm and covered it with her sweater. This was a big deal for my rule-following friend. And you want to talk about a connection? The minute she pulled back her sweater and began reading him the draft picks, he lit up and thanked her profusely. She had not only seen him but really cared about what he cared about. That is seeing the face of Christ in one another right there. A few days ago my friend was reflecting on what it would have been like had she never gone to visit this young man some years ago. She is now his pastor, in spite of their differences, in spite of those awkward first few visits, in spite of his alleged crime for which he has now been exonerated. While my friend wouldn't admit it, I imagine she might have wondered if this guy had really done something bad. Furthermore, she didn't know anyone in prison much less gone to visit. This discomfort and judgment almost prevented her from going. To me awkwardness and mercy go together, if we're willing to take the risk. Who are the people who make you uncomfortable in your life? I'm not talking about unsafe; I'm talking about uncomfortable. Maybe folks who you'd view as the tax collectors or sinners or fake or clueless or hypocrites or patronizing or sexist or racist or alcoholics or drug addicts or criminals or...the list keeps on going. You get the point- ones you might have a hard and uncomfortable time sitting at a table and sharing a meal?

There have been many stories in the Gospels that feature Jesus at table with others- friends and enemies: the curious, the critical, the devoted. "These stories about sharing meals have embedded in them symbolic themes. One of these themes is eating with others is an ethical or moral matter. In the ancient world, it was understood that sharing a meal created or cemented a relationship. Thus, it mattered with whom you 'broke bread,' which makes Jesus' practice of eating

with whoever invited him all the more noteworthy” (Cynthia M. Campbell, *Meeting Jesus at the Table*). Today’s Gospel story is set within a broader chapter of healings and controversies that highlight Jesus’ authority. At the beginning of chapter 9, Jesus enters the town and forgives a paralytic of his sins, thus showing the scribes that he has the authority to both heal and to forgive (vv. 1-8). In today’s story, Jesus is criticized for eating with “those” people...”the tax collectors and sinners.” Sinners? These were the people whom the “good people” thought of as disreputable. The last time I checked, there aren’t any of us who have escaped sin. We’re all children of God, and sinners in the need of grace. “None of us can free ourselves from the bondage of our sinful selfish desires. No, it takes God in Jesus Christ to create a clean heart in us and put a new spirit within us” (Nadia Bolz-Weber). Yet, while the Pharisees have the stereotype of being very judgmental, it is important to note the real controversy here. “The sinners were probably recognizably unsavory characters who lived lives very differently from the law-abiding Pharisees” (Waters). Yes, it’s true that tax collectors, like Matthew, were not well thought of or liked because collecting taxes in the Roman Empire was a franchise business operation. This system was ripe for exploitation, and tax collectors were often viewed as traitors to their own people. “This portrayal of Jesus challenges us to think about what it means to love or accept those whose lives are actually offensive to us. The radical answer hinted at in the text is that we are to break bread with them” (Waters).

Here Jesus is strolling through Capernaum, and he stops at the tax booth, where Matthew is doing his job. Jesus looks at Matthew and says, “Follow me.” In the next scene Matthew is hosting a dinner party for Jesus, his other disciples, and

some of Matthew's friends. And "since Matthew's work made him deeply suspect by nearly everyone, his friends were people like himself" (Campbell). Of all the criticisms of Jesus, with whom Jesus eats and healing on the Sabbath are the two most frequent. The Pharisees turn to Jesus' disciples and offer their criticism by way of a question: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Someone once invited someone to a church meal and this person asked, "Can I bring my friend with me? She is decent enough to enter church." I guess she hadn't heard that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. Another person commented to me at a previous church, "Look, pastor, we don't need any sinners in leadership or in the pulpit." And when I confronted her, and said, "Well, then no one would be in leadership or in the pulpit," she touched my arm, winked at me and said, "Oh, you know what I mean." Yes, I knew exactly what she meant, but she was unwilling to see me or herself in the sinner crowd with Jesus at the table. She was very unwilling to be awkward and uncomfortable- and unwilling to not only give but also receive God's mercy. And so I invited her to read this Gospel story thinking it may hold up a mirror for her and do you know what she discovered? It wasn't the answer I was looking for or expecting. She discerned that she should at least be open to the "sinners" because maybe God in Christ could redeem them? This is the 1000<sup>th</sup> time I was reminded that God is the one in control, not me.

Notice how in today's story Matthew gets up immediately and follows Jesus. Perhaps he is hungry for a real relationship with God and thirsty for living water? We aren't told why he follows Jesus...just that he follows him. Soon we find Jesus at Matthew's house, and it is filled with other malnourished souls hungering and

thirsting for God and a meal is shared at table. However, the text doesn't tell us whether Matthew's friends followed Jesus after this meal. We don't know. Yet, I suspect like so many others, Matthew and his friends had to have heard of Jesus and had witnessed how he reached out to those in pain. Jesus was and is a magnet for those who were ready for a new life. And Jesus ate with more kinds of people than most of us would ever feel comfortable with: sinners, tax collectors, soldiers, sex workers, fisherfolk, women, and lawyers and religious elite. Notice what Jesus did NOT do: not once does he reprimand those at the table, nor criticize them, not demand their repentance. No, Jesus simply eats and drinks with them. And let's look at the last supper. "Jesus broke bread with his friends who were just about to abandon, deny, and betray him. And yet, he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to these total screw-ups and said, 'this is my body, given for you, whenever you eat of it, do this in remembrance of me'" (Nadia Bolz-Weber).

When I have conversations with those who live alone, we often talk about mealtimes being the most lonely. Many of us experienced a little of what it's like to be alone for meals and fellowship during COVID when some of us had to isolate or quarantine for a week or more. While others of us didn't have the choice to quarantine, especially if living in a shelter. "In the ancient world, one of the few treatments for illness was isolation or quarantine. Thus, when someone was restored to health, they were able to return to their friends and families. This is precisely what Jesus does here: he ends the ostracism that Matthew and friends experienced. He restores them to community by including them in his fellowship" (Campbell).

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question by quoting a proverb. "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what this means: *I want mercy and not sacrifice*. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners" (vv. 12-13). What does that mean? He's trying to teach them that this story is about mercy as well as to look in the mirror, perhaps? That's why Jesus quotes from Hosea 6:6 when he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In other words, "living is not about appearances, rituals, reputations, or expectations. It is about sincerity, mercy, healing, and love (and I might add awkwardness). Jesus is the mercy of God in human form, never more so than when he eats with outcasts and welcomes all of us in our brokenness. Who belongs and who doesn't at Christ's table? At Triune we have an open table at communion- all are welcome at Christ's table- because we believe that no one is beyond God's redemption and mercy. The communion table is the longest table in the world, and the wideness of God's mercy reaches out to those on whatever margins society creates. Want to experience discomfort and awkwardness with us? Come to lunch and meet Christ at the table. Put all excuses aside. I can promise you plenty of risk-taking and transformation through hospitality.

"Because you see there's no way to be drawn to Jesus at the center without moving closer to one another. Jesus invites us to meet him at the table. Doing that is never easy or comfortable. It is awkward. Yes, it may be that the tax collectors and the other greasy sinners will have to be the ones to make the first move, because the 'good people' sitting at the supposedly best table have no clue about how and where to begin. Inviting people to share in the blessing of

community pretty much sums up what it means to go learn the meaning of mercy, the importance of compassion, and the foolishness of ritual. And that invitation from Jesus, that invitation into community, is, I think, why Matthew gets up” (*Grant M. VanderVelden, [sermon](#)*).

A youth group was on a mission trip in a border town in Arizona. On their last night there, they were worshiping and sharing communion. The pastor got up and headed toward the massive gate on the border. He had noticed a family observing the worship service, and he walked up to them and offered them the bread of life and the cup of salvation through the gate. Friends, this isn’t an all-are-welcome, kum-ba-ya kind of story. No. In his response, Jesus switches from defense to offense: “Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy not sacrifice.” Sometimes rules are meant to be broken when mercy is at stake. While Jesus refused to be ‘quarantined’ from society, how does the church, which is his body, quarantine itself from all of God’s children? “The real challenge of this story may be one of inclusion. Inclusion is much more difficult than tolerating and respecting from a distance. Inclusion challenges us to engage, to sit down together, to be in the moment with those whom we don’t know well enough to trust” (Campbell). Let’s get comfortable with being uncomfortable and be awkward together as we seek to follow Jesus and experience God’s mercy, along with the Matthews of this world, who seek to follow him, too. Amen.