

Not the Righteous

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 9:9-13
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
March 3, 2024

Hospitality is a matter of the heart.

At its core, hospitality is not about etiquette or rules or manners or codes of conduct. It's not about memorizing some script or knowing the right words to say to someone. Hospitality is a matter of the heart. In particular, hospitality is about having the heart of Jesus. When we sign on to follow Jesus, when we are baptized into his fellowship, when we join his band on tour, what we are signing onto is a journey where our hearts and our arms get stretched wider and wider, like Christ's arms on the cross, where his love and his mercy are poured out for the whole world. Hospitality is about sharing our lives with the world.

"I have come to call, not the righteous, but sinners." Jesus, the one who is Righteous, forever scrambles our thinking about what the word 'righteous' means. When a lot of us hear the word 'righteous,' we can tend to think it has to do with following rules. Those who are 'righteous' are those who have followed certain sets of rules or expectations.

Our world thinks in terms of rules, and rules have their place. Rules and laws are necessary for organizing a society. John Calvin taught that there were actually three purposes of the law – to expose human sin, restrain human evil, and to teach God's will. Rules and laws have their place, and all of that is good and needed.

But a key part of the power of sin is that sin can take something that is very good and twist it. In Romans 7, Paul says that sin 'seizes an opportunity' presented by the commandments. The 'opportunity' that sin seizes is that rules, and laws, and codes, and commandments can be used to *separate and divide*. The word 'diabolical' comes from words that mean 'to divide.' Sin takes the word 'righteous' and turns it into being 'self-righteous.' Sin uses rules to separate people into good ones and bad ones, into insiders and outsiders, to draw lines between us and them. And a fundamental principle about following Jesus is that whenever we have drawn a line, we can usually expect to see Jesus hanging out with the people on the other side of that line. Jesus hangs out with people that we wouldn't associate with. This can create all kinds of problems for us, but friends, it is the best news going. And it has huge implications for our practice of hospitality. Turn to the person next to you, and say, "You belong here."

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he, the children's Sunday school song went. But the really key thing about Zacchaeus was not how tall he

was, but that he was a *chief tax collector*. Tax collectors were despised in ancient Palestine, for they were locals who had signed on to gather tax revenue for the Roman empire. When they were able to extract more tax than was due from people, the tax collectors got to keep the extra in their own pockets. Zacchaeus, we are told, was not only a tax collector, he was a *chief* tax collector, and he was rich, so he had presumably gathered quite a bit of that extra at the expense of his own people. They were seen as traitors, disloyal, people with the wrong kind of job.

But in this story, Zacchaeus does the one thing necessary (cf. Luke 10:38-42). He moves towards Jesus. And that's enough.

All who wish to follow Jesus are invited to this table, regardless of their past, regardless of what they've done. No one should ever be forced or coerced to be here, but no one who wants to come should be turned away.

Jesus sees Zacchaeus – because Jesus always sees those who want to come to him – and he says, "I must stay at your house." So Zacchaeus hurried down to meet Jesus, and Jesus says, "This man, this chief tax collector, he, too, is a son of Abraham. He, too, is part of this family of faith."

Not everyone was thrilled. The text says, "**All** who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" If you're like me, you may have been told as a child, "You are known by the company you keep." Well, there are those who will say that Jesus keeps some problematic company.

Matthew 9 is also located in the world of the tax collectors. "As he sat at dinner, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples." There are a couple of things about this verse. One thing is, I've got to tell you, I love that the tax collectors and sinners were not just sitting with Jesus. It says they were sitting with his disciples, too. His disciples were learning from Jesus about the kinds of people who are to be found in their fellowship.

But another thing that is striking about this verse is the word 'many.' "Many tax collectors and sinners" were sitting with Jesus. It appears that tax collectors and sinners loved to be with Jesus. This is a core fact that we have to come to terms with. Tax collectors and sinners, people who were despised and looked down on by their community, loved to be with Jesus. He was righteous, and they still loved to hang out with him.

It has been the experience of a lot of people in our world that they would never be accepted in a church. Churches have looked down their noses at a lot of people, down through the years. We've held them up to various moral measuring sticks, have judged them to be inadequate, and have kept them outside. When people in our society

are asked what they think of when they hear the word "Christian," the word 'judgmental' comes up a lot.

People are not going to want to hang out with those who are consistently judging them. And the tax collectors and sinners loved to hang out with Jesus.

What we find with Jesus is that when we fall short, we fall into his arms. When we fail, we fail our way into his embrace. We do not climb our way up the performance ladder into the arms of Jesus. We do not achieve our way into the welcoming embrace of God. Our sin, our failure, our weakness, our character flaws, all the things that bring us to our knees and bring tears to our eyes, those are the things that bring us into the heart of Jesus. Our world uses those things to tell us we don't belong; Jesus uses them to restore our relationship with him.

"I have come to call, not the righteous, but sinners." The things that we thought would lead to our exile turn out to be the pathway by which we come back home.

"Those who believe they have done everything right, those who think they are well, they don't need a doctor," Jesus says. They'll be standing outside the party, like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, grumbling about all the losers who are inside having such a good time. Jesus takes the world's definitions of winners and losers and turns it inside out. Everyone who wants to follow Jesus is included.

Hospitality is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of asking Jesus to teach our hearts to share his love for people, so that we see people and love people the way he sees them and loves them. This includes ourselves, for we are included in spite of everything that we have ever done or failed to do. This includes the person sitting next to us, who is included in spite of everything they have done or failed to do. And it includes the people in our community, who are loved in spite of everything that they have done or failed to do. Hospitality is not about passing some test to be let in. It is about having our hearts opened up to the person who is near us. Turn to the person on the other side of you, and say, "You belong here." To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.