

Plumb Lines and Dinner Tables
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
October 29, 2023 PM Sermon
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Luke 5:27-33

So tonight we will do something a little different. I want to take you on a dinner tour, a dinner tour through the gospel of Luke. One of the unifying themes of Luke's gospel is the theme of meals. As Jesus goes about his ministry, Luke shows us Jesus sitting down for dinner with various people in various locations. On their own, these passages are worthy of a sermon. Taken together, they can teach us something about the Spirit of the gospel and the heart of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We just read the first meal story from the gospel. In a moment we will look at 6 more meals, but before we do that, let me say that as I reviewed these gospel meals, I found myself thinking of those exclusive big city night clubs. Do you know the kind I'm thinking of? You don't seem like the kind of people who would frequent an exclusive big city night club, but maybe you've seen them on TV. The scene is something like this: you're in a trendy New York neighborhood and there's a long line of beautiful people dressed in party clothes standing by a closed door. The door is the entrance to a club, and it is guarded by a couple of large bouncers. The bouncers let people into the club, but they do not admit people in order. The bouncers only admit people they judge to be worthy of entrance. They check out the people standing in line, and based on their clothes, their hair, their attitude, their vibe the bouncers decide if a person can come in. You could say that the bouncers walk up and down the line with a plumb line of judgement. At the bottom of that plumb line dangles the image of the right sort of person. A person who is cool and beautiful in just the right way. If you meet the standard you are ushered into the light of the party. If you don't meet the standard you are left outside in the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I thought of those exclusive nightclubs, because these stories in Luke have a similar dynamic. There's a lot of judgment, there are a lot of people holding up plumb lines, there are lots of people deciding who belongs and who doesn't. Let's go through these meals and you'll see what I mean.

The story I just read is the first meal of Luke's gospel. Jesus is having a dinner with Levi the tax collector and his friends, celebrating Levi's calling as a disciple. There's lots of good food and drink. Just outside the party are the Pharisees and they are shaking their heads, they are holding up their plumb line. "Why do you eat with sinners?" They say. "Don't you know that bad company corrupts good character." "And as far as we're concerned, you might be enjoying yourself a little too much for a rabbi. How come you don't fast like John's disciples." The Pharisees have a certain standard. Dangling from their plumb line is an image of what a righteous man should look like. He's a serious man, whose knees are bruised for constant prayer, whose skin is pale from constant fasting and who avoids the company of sinners. Jesus doesn't meet their standard. He likes to have fun, and he's hangs out with sinners.

Our next meal is found in Luke 7. Jesus is eating at a Pharisee's house this time, and in the middle of the meal, a woman comes up behind him. She's crying. She's crying so hard her tears are soaking Jesus' feet. Most commentators think she is a prostitute who's heard Jesus message of forgiveness. As an act of gratitude she pours out a bottle of perfume on Jesus' feet. Here's the Pharisee's reaction from verse 39: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who was touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner." Jesus shouldn't be showing attention to this prostitute! Later, when Jesus tells the woman her sins are forgiven, they're scandalized again. Forgive her sins?! Who does he think he is?! Once again, the Pharisees have the plumb line out and once again they're questioning his morals and the company he keeps.

Meal number 3 is also at a Pharisee's house, you find that meal in Luke 11:37 and following. Jesus is invited to a Pharisee's house for dinner, and again it starts with them holding up their plumb line. This time they judge him because he doesn't perform the ceremonial washing before the meal. So it's the same judgment: he's not morally serious. Jesus tells them it's not the outside of a person that needs cleaning; it's their inside.

Meal 4 happens in Luke 14 and it is another dinner with Pharisees that doesn't go well. Listen how Luke describes the beginning of that meal: "One Sabbath when Jesus went to the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched." Being watched means being judged. The plumb lines are out again, and again it's

moral judgment. They are watching to see if he would heal a sick man on the Sabbath. Jesus knows what they're thinking and he heals the man anyway. He then proceeds to challenge the whole way they do dinner parties. 'You guys love to have dinner parties where everyone can be seen and where you get to sit at the high places. When you give a dinner party, you should invite the poor, the blind and the lame.' It's the same area of conflict, right? The Pharisees are discriminating with their company and their morals. Jesus' idea of a party is more welcoming and less judgmental.

Meal number 5 is a famous one. It's the meal in the parable of the prodigal Son. Jesus isn't at this meal of course it's a story. But the themes are the same. When the prodigal returns from the far country, after he's wasted his father's inheritance on wild living, dad welcomes him back with a party. And not just any party; it's a 'let's kill the fatted calf' party. This time it's the elder son who's holding up the plumb line. He refuses to join the party. He doesn't approve of his father's acceptance of a man like his brother. He is scandalized by his father's grace, and he makes it clear that he'd rather stay out in the dark by himself than participate in the kind of party his dad is throwing. Same theme again: dad is too accepting of sinners.

Meal six takes us to Luke 19 and we are in the house of Zacchaeus. Jesus has just called the wee little man down from the sycamore tree and he's sitting at Zacchaeus' table. They're eating and drinking and laughing and once again, there are people nearby holding up their plumb lines. Verse 7: "All the people saw [Jesus at Zacchaeus' table] and they began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Do you remember what happens after that? Zacchaeus stands up and says, "I will give half my possessions to the poor, I will pay back everyone I've cheated four times what I took!" And Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house!" There's a similar dynamic at this meal too, judgment and exclusion versus acceptance and joy.

Last meal. And the last meal is of course, the Last Supper, the supper Jesus ate with his disciples on the night before he was betrayed. You know that meal. You probably know that meal pretty well. Was there any judgment at that meal, anyone holding a plumb line? Yes. There was. In Luke's telling of the Last Supper, this happens: "A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest." (The Bible doesn't say how that dispute got started, but I'm willing to bet that it started because they were arguing who should get to sit next to Jesus.) Jesus said to them, "Stop that! Instead of arguing about who gets the seat of honor, "the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves." The disciples are holding up plumb lines to each other and Jesus says, "NO! That's not the spirit of this kingdom. That's not the spirit of this meal."

Put these seven stories together and you don't just have individual stories; you have a biblical theme, a theme that the Holy Spirit, through Luke, really wants us to hear. It's a theme that contrasts two different kinds of meals, two different kinds of parties, two different ways of being in the world. On the one hand you have the table of the Pharisees, the community of the Pharisees. It's a community of discrimination. It's a community of the plumb line. To be admitted here, you have to be the right sort of person and have the right sort of resume. On the other hand, you have the table of Jesus: a table of acceptance, a table of grace, a table of forgiveness. The table of the Pharisees has a spirit of seriousness and scrutiny. The table of Jesus has a spirit of acceptance and joy. At the Pharisee's party there is someone with a stern face who sizes you up; at Jesus' party the door is wide open and the host says come on in.

Do both tables still exist today? Absolutely. Do we know what it's like to be in a community where we feel as though everyone around us is pulling out their plumb line and judging us? Yes. Yes, we do. We are constantly being measured. Ask a middle school student. Do they feel as though they're being sized up by their classmates all the time? Yes. Ask a high school student. They feel like people are holding up a plumb line to them all the time. Do they meet the beauty standard? Are they smart enough, are they funny enough, are they talented enough to be noticed, to be popular. Social media has made that worse.

It doesn't stop in adolescence. In our data driven meritocracy, everything is measured. There are plumb lines everywhere. Do you have enough billable hours? Are your productivity numbers sufficient? Are you bringing value to the company? Did you meet your quarterly sales goal? What's the bounce rate on your website? How are your children's test scores? What's your score on rate my professor? What's your score on rate my doctor? In a data driven meritocracy, everything is measured.

This is exhausting of course; it wears us out. But it also forms us. When you get judged all the time, you become a judge. When everyone is holding the plumb line up to you, you will start to do the same things to

everyone else. Think back to that analogy I made at the beginning about the people at the exclusive nightclub. If you know that the bouncer at the door is going to judge you to see if you're cool enough for the club, what's the first thing that you do? You start looking at everyone else to see how you measure up with respect to them. You pull out the plumb line. 'I'm cooler than that guy, but that guy is way better dressed than me, and that guy is way better looking. I'm in trouble!' Now we're the ones holding up the plumb line and our judgments are particularly miserable: we are rejoicing in people's weakness and frailty and we are sad about their strength. Living in a data driven meritocracy turns us into people of the plumb line.

I know, I know. Some judgment and measurement is needed in this world. But when the judgment and the measurement is everywhere, people are miserable. The whole world is desperate for a different kind of community, a community of acceptance, kindness, grace. Why do you think people flocked to Jesus, and why do you think it was especially the most broken people who flocked to him?

As we go back through all the meals in Luke, what exactly makes Jesus' community different? We've already said that it's less judgmental and more accepting. But what creates that difference? As I surveyed the story, it strikes me that there are a couple of things. First, where the Pharisees see people according to rules and categories, Jesus sees people as individuals, individuals with stories, individuals with flaws, individuals whom he wants to help and save.

In our passage, the Pharisees see Jesus eating with a sinner; Jesus sees Levi, an individual. An individual he has called, a disciple, a companion. When the woman anoints Jesus feet the Pharisees see her as a sinner, a prostitute, someone to turn away from in disgust. Jesus sees her as a child of God who needs forgiveness, who needs to be set free. In the story in Luke 7:44, Jesus actually says to his hosts, "Do you see this woman?" Do you see her as a person, as an individual? Same kind of dynamic in the Zacchaeus story. The crowds see Zacchaeus as a sinner. Jesus looks at his face and speaks his name and says, "I want to spend time with you. I want to dine at your table." Jesus looked at these people as individuals, people who may be broken and sinful, but who were first of all, people made by his Father, people who needed love, people he had come to save and help and die for.

The second difference is our standard of judgment. Ultimately we Christians do have a plumb line that we hold up to the people around us, but it's not the plumb line of human perfection; at the bottom of that plumb line is the cross. We meet people on the street and we measure them against the cross, and when we do that we see that they are like us: broken people for whom Christ came to this world. They are people for whom Christ died. They are one of the 'whosoever.' The whosoever as in: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever might believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life." Those people begging at the edge of the parking lot, part of the whosoever, whom God so loved. The cranky neighbor who makes your life miserable, one of the whosoever. The fellow church member with whom you have those disagreements, one of the whosoever. When the cross is your plumb line, it changes so much. You see people differently. You see yourself differently. You treat people with grace and acceptance. You have more hope for them.

This change is part of the heart of the Reformation. As a young man Martin Luther was caught up in the plumb line mindset. Only the judgment wasn't just directed to others, it was directed to himself. Luther would agonize over every sin in his life, he obsessed on his mistakes and his sinful thoughts, and he anguished over being able to confess them all. He kept holding up the plumb line of perfection over his life and despairing at his failures. But in his studies of Romans and the Psalms something changed. "At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open." You could say that Luther changed from holding up the plumb line of perfection, to holding up the plumb line of the cross, and the grace of Jesus set his heart free. Does that mean that Luther stopped fighting against sin in himself or in others? Of course not. But he didn't beat himself up like he used to. Because his hope wasn't founded on his success or failure in that fight; his hope was found in nothing less than Jesus and his righteousness.

I want to say one more thing about these meal stories and the way they highlight the grace and acceptance of Jesus. It strikes me that Jesus was radical in two ways. He brought radical righteousness. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wants us to live in the ways of his Father. But Jesus also practiced radical acceptance. That's what we see

in these meals. It didn't matter who you were or what you'd done, Jesus' arms were open to you, offering you love and acceptance and a chance for a new life.

In our life as Christians both those radical sides of Jesus should be in us too. We should be a community deeply committed to righteousness and obedience. We should be a community deeply committed to welcoming the broken and making them feel loved and accepted. It's hard to do both of those things. Churches who are really strong on obedience and following are often not great at grace and acceptance. Churches that are really good at welcome and acceptance are often weak on obedience and their commitment to righteousness. If we are to be the body of Christ, we must have both. Because Christ died for both. On the cross his arms are open to all of us messy whosoever, and he's dying to make them new.

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