

Sermon on Matthew 9, 1-9, 04.02.2007

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. 10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him 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 But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Dear Congregation,

What I like the best about this story is that the tax-collectors and sinner are allowed to sit with Jesus at this table. That does not go unnoticed by the Pharisees, who complain about it and say: *'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?'* What they really mean is: How can he be together with these scums? – But Jesus does not care about what they say. He replies: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."* 13 *Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'* – And what he means is this: God is honestly interested in all people, not only in those who are just, or who strongly believe, or those whom he does not have to forgive or show mercy first. 'For God shows no partiality', says the apostle Paul. And this is what this story is all about.

If you start thinking about it, is almost impossible anyways to draw a clear line between the righteous and the sinners. Who sins, who is just? Or more precisely asked: "Who does not sin at all; and who manages to be righteous all the time, anyway? – And before you know it you deal with the main thought of this story, which is basically pointing out to us, that all people are sinner, even if this is not clearly said here. The only thing which might differentiate us from the people sitting at the same table with Jesus is the frequency of sinning or the severity of their sins. We can't say they sin and we don't – to claim that would not be right on our part.

The Pharisees convict themselves in this story. Normally they would need to observe the law of neighbourly love. They are bound to it, because it is part of the Old Testament codex of the law. But instead, they point fingers, and say bad things about the sinner and through this, they condemn themselves. Jesus gives them some biblical advice right away from the Prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Mercy that is what needs to be granted. Isn't it so, that especially the weak, the sick, the sinners, need attention? What is good for to exclude those people? What would you gain through this?

I think we can easily and quickly figure out what Jesus is aiming at. And who could deny not to gleefully be amused that the Pharisees are rebuffed by Jesus. But, careful! Jesus is testing our tolerance as well: Would we like to enjoy the company of Tax-Collectors and Sinners, since we have already problems to sit at one table with our brothers and sisters. But I do not want to rant and rave. I just want to campaign for the borderless community among Christians and come back to the original thought, and maybe also the most important thought of this story: No matter who we are, we can come to God's table which is always set for us.

Please, let us stay with this picture for a moment: A prepared table is something very nice, don't you think so? If you are hungry and come home and you can sit down right away at a table and start eating – that is a true pleasure, isn't it? But this story is not just about eating and drinking. The table is a symbol for community. And that is actually what the best about it is. To eat alone is no fun, but together with other this is enjoyable. And this is what community is all about: Eating with other make the meal truly delicious. The conversations we have, the exchange of ideas, where you sing and laugh, where you eat and talk, where you

meet kindred spirits and where you listen and be challenged, where you at times quarrel, but reconcile – this is the place where you want to be seated and be there.

This is what the first Christian gatherings are all about, with Christ in their midst, and later on, after Jesus passed and was resurrected called together by the Holy Spirit, those communities of believers form around a table. A table, that is the symbol of God's invitation and the community he gives. A table in the midst. No special invitation. No name cards, no reserved seats. Everyone is welcome. A table, big enough that it fits all. This God's model; for congregational life. This is simply the standard we have to live up to as individual congregations.

I am pretty sure, that we wish or have wished for this when we arrived in this congregation. But after we settled in we might have forgotten how important that still is for people who join us. Are we willing to share this table with others? And if the answer is 'yes' with whom would you share it? Only with you friends and people of same opinion, kindred spirits, or with everyone and even people who oppose your views?

This is or could be also something which then differentiates us from any other organization. This is exactly what could make us as congregations so special. Where else would you find this that a stranger can come in and can sit right a way at a prepared table? Where else can you find doors wide open, welcoming people from all walks of life? Where else do you not need a qualification, some proof of who you are and what you can do? Here we can just show up, because God has invited us and he knows us inside out anyways.

If we read the story carefully, there were certainly many things in regards to this dinner which could be criticized from a traditional point of view, the view of the Pharisees. Jesus breaks all rules. He does not care about the rites of cleansing. According to the law-based strict faith of the scribes Jesus and becomes impure and useless in the eyes of God. The Holy, the spotless is spoiled. This was no small peccadillo, that a grave mistake, a trespass of faith. – But from Jesus' point of view there is something which is superior to any religious law: and that is the real needs of people. (I am talking about the desire to receive help and get things right with God and people).

What this means for us is: Do we make people with their desire to receive help and encouragement a top priority in our work as a congregation? I think it is a great strength for our congregation that we do not have to worry about who is allowed in and who is not, who can become a member and who does not. God calls people together, and we, as a congregation, are only the product his work as a missionary. He is the one who produces this community. He creates it, protects it, and maintains it. And every one of us has been a new member here at one point in time. It is therefore not important for how long we are members of our church (think of the workers in the vineyard, who all receive the same acknowledgment for the master of the vineyard, who is God). More important is that we do not forget how important it was for us, that we have been welcomed into this community. As long as we continue to do the same – and I am certain that our overall marks on that point are fairly good, with just a little bid room for improvement here and there – Christ's table remains in the midst of our fellowship. – But if we ever forget this, we run the risk to loose our uniqueness as a Christian community and become just the same as any other organization, in which not the openness and the welcoming is a top priority, but the selection and the allowing of admittance, which creates some kind of an elite – which does not exist at Jesus' table at all.

The church is in many ways the only organization, which really sets the table for those in need. How many people receive a warm meal inside churches, especially this time of year? What do churches do to accommodate the needs through programs and activity and charity? Given all the critique from the outside which to a certain degree might be legitimate, the most important thing is often missed by the criticize: That we have prepared a home for people in churches for about 2000 years. The new archbishop of Toronto,

Thomas Collins, a man to watch, said in an interview with the Toronto Star this week: “It is only certain topics which make headlines when it comes to churches. What most people also the media does not notice is the dedication with which we serve those in need. – How right he is!

2. Do we know about the needs of people around the table?

There is something else which really makes me think. And actually to which I do not have any sufficient answer right now. But when we met with the Assistant to the National Bishop, Ryan Anderson, at the Synod office, last week, a meeting geared to create a policy for social justice issues in our church, he read Isaiah 58 to all of us. If you should ever wonder why we do charity at all and fight for the marginalized, you should read this chapter). It says there among other things: “Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.” We were asked about our opinion about the text, and it made me think what an elderly woman said. She said: “As congregations we are used to help people wherever we can. Usually we do not have a problem with that, when it comes to Global Hunger appeals of natural catastrophes, we give freely then and respond quickly to the needs of people far away. But what exactly do we do for people sitting in our own pews? I think, she said, that we would help them, but how much do we know about each others needs? We know more about the needs in the world than about the needs in our own church.”

Dear Congregation,

The advantage the people who were sitting with Jesus around this table had, was that they knew a lot about each other. By the way, I do not say that we are exactly like those people who are represented around this table. What I am saying is that we are quite a bit distant from the this form of a community in which we really live together as a family, knowing about each others needs, knowing what people burdens. I would wish for that no one has to be embarrassed to say: “I need help, I am in trouble, I have financial needs. I am not saying that this does not happen. Sometimes people feel that this is too personal to tell anyone except the Pastor, and I understand that. Sometimes there is confidential information involved when we talk about what is going on in our homes, and I understand that too. I also understand that sometimes people are ashamed to admit that they need help and support. Like the man we have given a small amount of money and who stand crying right in front of me, because he was embarrassed and touched. I almost cried with him, and I said to him: “You do not have to be ashamed. We love to help you. There is nothing wrong with that.

Again, the helping as such is no problem. We, too, help, wherever we can and I have not seen any generosity like this which is customary in this church. We help. But what I am talking about is the trust, the openness, that we overcome our embarrassment. What I am talking about is that in this congregation, regardless of what is going on in our lives, we have a place, where we share besides bread, also sadness and joy, the good and the bad, and that we do this in a way that no one has to feel embarrassed. At Christ’s table we can really be who we are. We do not need to impress anybody. Here is the place where we can find God and in the act of doing that, find ourselves as well.

All critics of ‘organized religion’ – that is what they call us, ‘organized religion’ that they have to look for a long time when they want to find a place like this except in churches; a place where people are helped and cared for. And to come back to one symbol used in the movie last Sunday, when the old fellow by the name of Alvin Straight talks to the runaway, a pregnant girl in her teens: He said: It is easy to break on stick, but you can not break a whole bundle of it. That is what makes a difference between one person and a family of people. And a church family is also like a bundle of sticks. Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.