

Protagonist Corner

Guess Who's Invited to Dinner?

Preaching AIDS issues from Luke 5:27-32

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"Where do you want to sit?"¹ Kevin asked his best friend Paul in last year's opening episode of ABC's *The Wonder Years*. Where to sit was a critical decision for these two seventh graders because they were entering one of life's most dangerous battlefields: the Junior High School cafeteria on the first day of school. Kevin and Paul knew the importance of their decision; they knew they had to be careful where they sat. As the anxious face of Kevin surveyed the options, his adult voice narrated the meaning of their dilemma:

A suburban Junior High cafeteria in 1968 was like a microcosm of the world. The goal is to protect yourself, and safety comes in groups. You have your cool kids. You have your smart kids. You have your greasers. And in those days, of course, you had your hippies. In effect, in Junior High School, "who you are" is defined less by "who you are" than by who's the person sitting next to you at lunch.²

Kevin is right, of course, and not just about school cafeterias. All of us sense that "who we are" is determined less by "who we are" than by the person seen sitting next to us at the dinner table. We don't sit with just anyone. We don't invite just anyone to dinner; nor do we accept just anyone's dinner invitation. We have to be careful with whom we break bread, for, as William Willimon wrote, "our dinner tables are our sanctuaries, holy, intimate spaces of identity, where we learn 'who we are' and 'who we are not.'"³ Thus, when we are trying to convince ourselves that someone is not a full, valuable, human being, worthy and acceptable, we are careful not to invite that person to dinner, for, as Oscar Wilde put it, "After a good dinner one could forgive anybody, even one's relatives."⁴

The fact that we are defined by our mealtime associations is why so many of Jesus' critics were angry with him. They hated his choice of dinner companions. The way Luke tells it, Jesus' friends were a motley crew, the type who were expected to sit only at the back tables of the school cafeteria: tax collectors, lepers, fishermen, and assorted women, some of ill repute. So the Pharisees kept reminding Jesus what every seventh grader knows: "You've got to be careful whom you eat with."⁵

In Luke's gospel, one of the first people Jesus invited to join him was Levi, a much hated tax collector. It was common knowledge that tax collectors were swindlers, traitors, and—worst of all—idolators. Like lepers, then, tax collectors were viewed as unclean, thus, untouchable. Anyone who associated with them became unclean by association. So when the Pharisees saw Jesus at Levi's table, we can sense their shock and outrage. We can hear them

murmuring among themselves, "Doesn't Rabbi Jesus know you have to be careful? Doesn't he know that 'who you are' is defined less by 'who you are' than by who's the person sitting next to you at lunch?" So, for Jesus' own good, they challenged him. But Jesus replied, loosely paraphrased, "If you're not sick, you don't need a doctor" (Luke 5:31). And by the tone of his voice and by the look in his eye, the Pharisees knew that Jesus was implying that those who are most sick are those who have no idea that they are sick.

This was the sickness of the Pharisees, but, of course, they didn't see it that way. They were scandalized by Jesus' behavior. And why not? "To have believed and waited and suffered for so long as God's faithful people, only to see God's anointed One making no distinctions, breaking the boundaries, inviting the outcasts, who wouldn't take offense?"⁶

"Who is this who even forgives sins?" the Pharisees demanded later in Luke (7:49). Who is this who reveals the sin of my own smugness? my own separation? "Who is this who dares slap our tidy, simple categories of the saved and the damned, the sinners and the righteous?" Who is this bread and boundary breaker? Doesn't he know we have to make distinctions? that we have to be careful?

As surely as two seventh graders standing in the lunchroom know the unwritten rules, Jesus knows the rules but refuses to play by them. For he is the One of God who was and is "more caring than careful."⁷ As he shattered the boundary of death at Easter, he is the one who tears down all destructive boundaries, distinctions, and simplistic judgments. And he does this by being "more caring than careful."⁸

Karl Barth minced no words on the meaning of all the feasting with the tax collectors and sinners passages when he wrote:

Christians who refuse to sit with their Master at the table of the so-called publicans and sinners are not Christians at all.⁹

This Easter, when in Christ's name, we break the bread and pour out the wine and invite all baptized in His name to feast together at the table of his grace, we have to ask ourselves some difficult questions: Who are we ignoring? With whom are we refusing to sit? Through whom does Christ challenge us to perceive our own sickness? With whom does he call the Church to be "more caring than careful?"

People with AIDS is my answer to these questions. There is an obvious AIDS crisis in our world and in every community of our nation. This crisis will get a lot worse before it gets any better. There are people with AIDS in our churches and in our communities who are dying. Too often they are dying alone, rejected by family and abandoned by friends, and ignored, if not blatantly scorned, by the Church of Jesus Christ.

In addition, there is much too much ignorance and misinformation which is producing massive amounts of fear and even hatred of people with AIDS. Already in our country we have seen fear erupt with homes and schools being burned and with children and adults being isolated and scorned, just like the tax collectors in Jesus' day. And I fear that the Church of Jesus Christ, including we clergy, is among the last to respond to this crisis in ways "more caring

than careful.”

Many are uncomfortable with the life-styles of most of the first wave of AIDS sufferers; some clearly disapprove; most have stayed silent, like the sulky Jonah waiting outside Nineveh for people he felt should be destroyed to be destroyed.

Judgment and exclusion are not what God wanted then, and clearly they are not what God wants now. The Church is called to be “more caring than careful.” We preachers are called to call God’s people to Christ’s stance of compassion and caring, specifically for people with AIDS and their families.

We know that Levi, the tax collector, was defiled, hated, and shunned by godly people because of his occupation; others received the same treatment because of their disease. But Christ’s response to all was the same: he was “more caring than careful.” He did not judge them; he cared for them. He did not exclude them; he dined with them. Also, he offered to heal the hatred and misdirected righteousness of those who would exclude them from the table of God’s grace. As preachers of this good news, our call is clear.

The Church of Jesus Christ exists to minister, first in our own communities. This means that we preachers must perceive and even anticipate the fears of the people in our communities. We must speak Christ’s good news to overcome these fears. The Church is the best institution to provide accurate AIDS awareness information to our communities. The Church is more than adequately empowered to lead our communities in responding to this crisis with compassion and caring, not with hate and violence.

In addition, the Church is the best institution to provide ministries of direct caring for those suffering with AIDS, whose problems of isolation and alienation are almost as devastating as their illness itself. But to do this, we preachers must counter our own and our peoples’ resistance and reluctance to respond in ways “more caring than careful.” We must proclaim the basic truth that when someone is hurting, when someone is sick, it is the duty of the People of God to care. Period. It has nothing to do with how they got that way. Just as it is the duty of the paramedic to rescue the car wreck victim, regardless of whether he or she is considered an innocent victim or a wreckless driver, it is the duty of the People of God to minister when people are hurting. We cannot pass by like rubberneckers at an accident site. We must be there in person. We must be mediators of God’s holy presence there. That’s what Jesus did. That’s what we do. Period.

I believe we preachers are being called to a ministry of AIDS education and fear reduction in our communities. We can educate ourselves and the people of our churches. In your congregation, as in mine, there is a high percentage of community leaders. The adults, youth, and children of our congregations can have a significant impact working through their business and peer groupings. We preachers can prepare and call them to this ministry. Accurate AIDS education—both for prevention and for caring—is needed in all areas of our communities, and it needs to be communicated over and over again.

Some preachers and some of the members of our congregations also are being called to a ministry of direct care with the sick and dying of AIDS and with their families. There are individuals in our congregations capable of direct

care. They need to hear God's call to offer their gifts in support of people with AIDS. In Christ's name, we can call them to join in this ministry.

On the night that Christ was most caring and least careful, he invited us to drink the cup that he drinks. He cares too much to be careful with us. He refuses to let us isolate ourselves or anyone else. At his table this Easter—breaking bread with him and with all the dinner companions he has called, including even us—we can indeed become “who we are”: Christ's own people, more “caring than careful.”

NOTES

¹ Carol Black and Neal Marlens, *The Wonder Years*, ABC, January 24, 1988, episode 1.

² Ibid.

³ William H. Willimon, “Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life,” *The Upper Room* (1981): 45. My thanks to the Rev. Willimon for the inspiration and some of his words used for this article.

⁴ Quoted without citation in Willimon, p.45.

⁵ Willimon, p. 45.

⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), p.80; quoted in Willimon, p. 51.