

Homily-Eating With Tax Collectors and Sinners

As I reflected on today's Gospel two situations came to mind. The first situation that came to mind was the visit that Pope John II made to Mehmet Ali Agca who was imprisoned for attempting to assassinate the Pope. In 1981 Agca shot the Pope in St. Peter's Square. Two after Christmas of 1983 John Paul II visited Agca in prison. The discussion between the two men was never made public but we know that John Paul II forgave Agca for his act. This event captures the stance of Jesus toward Matthew and the other tax collectors and sinners. Jesus offered the tax collectors and sinners the forgiveness of God.

The second set of circumstances that I remember was the prison ministry that I did in Shreveport. For a period of time I visited the prisoners in Caddo Correctional Institute. I would hear the confessions of prisoners and afterward I would celebrate Mass with the prisoners. Within that setting certain confessions stand out. From time to time men would confess the sadness they felt over the effect that their time in prison had on their family members. Others would speak about how long it had been since they had last confessed. There was a sense of repentance in the lives of many of the prisoners that I encountered. The tax collectors and sinners showed the same sense of repentance in their encounter with Jesus.

In the Gospel Jesus is traveling out of the region of the Sea of Galilee. In his journey he passes by a man sitting at his customs post. He is possibly collecting taxes on goods taken out of the area such as fish. Jesus invites the man to follow him. The tax collector Matthew immediately got up and followed Jesus.

In the Roman Empire contracts for collecting taxes and tolls were often put out to bid. The highest bidder hired local people to collect the fees. In this system the bidder and his employees were responsible for paying the taxes to the government. But they could also try to get extra taxes for the people in order to increase their personal profit. Even if they were not skimming off the top they were suspected of doing so. Thus by the nature of the tax system they were suspected of dishonesty. In Judea they may have also been looked on as being collaborators with the Roman army. To eat with a tax collector meant to become ritually impure. Jesus breaks the customs of the day in order to call a man who was considered a sinner.

In the time of Jesus no one would have paid attention to Matthew. It is significant that Matthew immediately follows Jesus. Matthew is not bound by the conventions of the time and instead shows himself to be a man of faith through following Jesus without hesitation.

The Gospel next says that Jesus eats in “his” house. This may have been the house of Jesus or the house of Matthew. It is significant that Jesus eats with tax collectors. Just as Jesus is shown to be comfortable with the tax collectors and sinners of his day the risen Christ continues to be comfortable with us and our sinfulness. Of course knowing that Christ loves us we are called to turn back to Jesus.

In the biblical tradition meals were important occasions rich in symbolism. It was customary to ratify agreements or covenants over meals, and the sacrifices offered in the temple often involved meals. Jews in Jesus time pictured the kingdom of God as a great banquet, sometimes with the Messiah presiding. The meal was an image of hope for the fullness of God’s kingdom.

During the meal the Pharisees asked Jesus why he dared to eat with tax collectors and sinners. The “sinners” were those who because of their lifestyle or occupation or actions were looked upon as failing to meet proper religious standards. To share a meal with tax collectors and sinners was scandalous.

One of the most striking and controversial features of Jesus’ public ministry was his custom of sharing meals with marginal or disreputable people. Both the Pharisees and the Essenes conducted communal meals with religious overtones. But their meals were exclusive in that only the “right” people could participate.

In eating with tax collectors and sinners Jesus was performing an enacted parable about God’s kingdom and his role in it. With this symbolic action, Jesus was saying that **some surprising persons will be part of the banquet in God’s kingdom**, and that only those who **recognize their need for God’s mercy can hope to enter it**. The Pharisees failed to understand Jesus’ symbolism. Their own fellowship meals, which were central to their piety and lifestyle, would not admit such persons. Why would Jesus with whom they had so much in common, eat with such marginal and disreputable persons?

In his response to the Pharisees Jesus gives three answers. First Jesus says: “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do.” Jesus observes that the sick need doctors, and then presents himself as offering spiritual healing to marginal and disreputable people by reconciling them to God and setting them on the right path of wise living.

Jesus' second answer is a quotation of Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He presents himself as the agent of God's mercy by offering those in spiritual need an opportunity to turn to God and enjoy the fullness of God's kingdom. "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Jesus desires that the Pharisees live in love rather than temple sacrifices. The prophet Hosea exhorts the people of Israel because they rely on external cult without submission to Yahweh's commands. The word mercy is the English translation of the Hebrew word *hesed* which means loving kindness. Fidelity to God's covenant called the people to live out loving kindness. God was said to be a God of loving kindness. Jesus is saying the religious observance of the Pharisees must be characterized by love. Matthew is proposing that the Christian movement could preserve Judaism. Its preservation could happen only if mercy was followed and not the program of temple sacrifices.

In Jesus' final answer he says, "**For I came to call not the righteous, but sinners.**" Mercy determines the nature of Jesus' Messianic mission. He comes to invite sinners, those who think they are excluded from the banquet of mercy. If the righteous oppose the sinners coming to the banquet they oppose God's will. They may not enter the banquet to which they feel they have been invited.

Jesus had his greatest success with marginal and disreputable people. His meals with them were signs of hope not only regarding God's kingdom but also concerning the people who might participate in it. People came to Jesus to find spiritual healing and divine mercy. They find both in Jesus. Jesus comes to invite sinners to the banquet of mercy.

Jesus constantly shows this mercy to those who welcome him into their homes and their lives. It is not the professionally religious who were able to receive Jesus, who judged themselves in right relationship with God by their adherence to the Law, but rather, those who knew their sin and their need for God's mercy. In acknowledging their total dependence on God, they were open to what God alone could give and do for them.

We will now begin the Eucharist which is a religious meal which reflects Jesus' meal with the tax collectors and sinners. In the Eucharist Jesus continues to both welcome and call sinners. Just as he did with the tax collectors and sinners of his day Jesus eats with sinners. We are called to be like the tax collectors and sinners of the Gospel, we are called to see our need for the forgiveness that Jesus offers. Eucharist is a meal in which we give thanks for the forgiveness that has been brought about through the suffering and death of Jesus. Let us now give thanks to God for his gift of forgiveness.