

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:15-16)

Like the scribes and pharisees I'm appalled that Jesus dined with them. The lazy part of me wishes he hadn't. My work as a Christian would have been so much easier if he hadn't. After all, he didn't have to dine with them. He could have just spiritually reached out to them, remaining socially distant. There is a story in the Gospels of a leper who prostrated himself—lay flat on his face—before Jesus and asked him to heal him. Jesus could have waved his holy hand from six feet away and the leper would have been healed. But the Gospel is at pains to say that he "stretched out his hand to touch him," which must have meant that he got down on the ground with him. This makes my Christian calling so much more difficult.

Even more so than today, to dine with a person in Jesus' day—to "break bread" with them—was to offer and seek companionship with that person. The very roots of our word *companion* mean *com pane/con pan...* to break bread with. This is what appalled the scribes and pharisees and appalls me too. Jesus didn't just come to heal and convert the "bad people," he came to befriend them. This makes my Christian calling so much more difficult.

And it wasn't just with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus broke bread with everybody. He scandalously chatted up a despised foreign woman at the local watering hole. He reclined at table with the very Pharisees that wanted him dead. He even tried to enter into the private home of a Roman centurion and would have succeeded if the good man had not stopped him because of the trouble it would get Jesus into. Think about this a moment: Jesus tried to befriend sinners, Pharisees and Roman centurions. There was not a single other person in all of Israel who sought friendship with all three of these warring parties. This makes my Christian calling so much more difficult.

Our nation's civil society is in a state of acrimony and Christians are called to take a leadership role in restoring it. We envision doing this by converting the "bad people" and healing the despised and persecuted. Indeed, we must try to do both of these things. But if only we could stop there. If only we could keep our distance. If only we didn't have to dine with them all.

Try this mental exercise with me. Place before your mind's eye the politician who makes your blood boil—be it Trump or Pelosi, Harris or Cruz. Now imagine saying what

Jesus said to a despised one of his day, “Come, quickly. I mean to dine with you tonight.” Imagine genuinely reaching out in friendship towards this person in your head. “I love you. I want to break bread with you. I want to become your friend.”

It seems to me that this is humanly impossible. But it is divinely possible. For us to dine with everybody, we’re going to have to get some divinity inside of us. As the priest prepares the altar at every Mass, he pours a little water into the chalice and whispers, “By the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in your divinity as you have shared in our humanity.” This is our only hope of fulfilling our Christian calling—our only hope of leading the nation to become a society wherein we all break bread together as one family. We’re going to have to approach the table of the Lord, to consume divinity so as to become divine. Only then will we love like God loves. Only then will his kingdom come on earth as it is heaven.

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