

**THIS FELLOW WELCOMES SINNERS AND EATS WITH THEM**

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Notice that *sinner* is not a word that Jesus uses. *Sinner* is a word some church members use to describe unchurched people. Tax collectors and sinners are types of unchurched people. <sup>The Pharisees & Scribes, church members, grumbled because</sup> Jesus welcomed unchurched people and enjoyed eating with them.

Jesus still enjoys eating with unchurched people. You can still see Jesus over at the Octarora hotel having lunch with unchurched people. He asks questions about their families and concerns and unchurched people listen and open up to him. Go down to the Pub and you’re liable to see Jesus. He sometimes sits at the bar. He orders a beer, sometimes scotch and soda – although he *never* drinks too much. Unchurched people pull up bar stools on either side of him. They enjoy listening to Jesus. He tells good stories. Jesus enjoys eating with unchurched people. Sometimes he goes to fancy restaurants where you have to wear a coat and tie – just to meet unchurched people. Sometimes Jesus eats at truck stops where loud country music is played on the juke box and men wear their caps and all the waitresses have big hair. Those truckers gather around Jesus and listen. They don’t think they’d like church but they love Jesus. Jesus doesn’t tell them to remove their caps. Sometimes he leaves his own *John Deere* cap on so as not to appear snooty.

→ He beats them snooty as sinners. As they talk they become aware of a desire long hidden... a version of salvation... of whom he has desired them

Unchurched people really like Jesus. If we churched people would just let unchurched people see Jesus

living in us – they’d like *us* and come near to listen to him. Unchurched people always have loved Jesus, they always will - because he doesn’t come across as *holier than thou*. Jesus is holy. He’s the sinless son of God, but he never tries to point out sins in unchurched people. Jesus came from heaven above, but he’s down to earth. He enjoys a good joke. He has a wonderful laugh that wells up from deep within. But he never tells jokes that put down people or demean sex, race, gender or ethnicity as so many of our jokes do.

Jesus loves to eat and drink with unchurched people. He eats and drinks with unchurched Republicans and Democrats, with liberals and conservatives, with rich and poor, labor and management, with straight and

gay people. He doesn't care if some church people get offended. Back in the days of segregation and Jim Crow laws – Jesus would walk right up to the *Whites Only* lunch counter and sit down. That really made a lot of church people angry, but he did it anyway. He eats and drinks – not just for nutritional value, nor simply to satisfy his own hunger, but because he enjoys the company of unchurched people.

But not everybody likes the way Jesus hangs out with unchurched people. Some church people frown upon God's love for the unchurched. Some church people feel that it's wrong to give undue attention to unchurched people. After all, they don't pay the bills. They don't work in the kitchen and hand out bulletins and attend all kinds of committee meetings and Bible Studies. And a lot of times – they're not like us. They don't think like us. They don't act like us. They don't know us." <sup>They don't share our history & customs</sup> And a lot of them have lifestyles we don't like. "Why waste time on them?"

Some church people *erroneously* believe that God chose us church people in order to *exclude* unchurched people, that God divides the world between the saved and the lost. We saved people go to heaven and the lost go to hell and that's just the way it is and praise God we're saved and not lost. But that's not what Jesus says. Christ chooses us church people in order that we may *include* those outside in God's love. God's purpose and plan is to include the lost in his grace. God has predestined the unchurched to be included in the heavenly banquet.

When church people, the Pharisees and scribes, grumbled because Jesus ate with unchurched people – he told them three stories about the trouble God goes through in order to include the lost at his heavenly table. First, Jesus said God is like a woman who lost a penny and swept her house until she finds it. Then she throws a big party and rejoices that she has found her lost coin. Second, Jesus said God is like a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep until he finds it and brings it safely back into the sheepfold. Then the shepherd throws a big party and invites everybody to celebrate with him.

In the third story, a father has two sons. The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance. He's tired of living at home. He wants to live independently of his father just like many of us want to live independently of God. So his father gives his youngest son his inheritance and sadly watches him leave home.



The father knows his son will never be happy living independently of him but he lets him go into a distant country. Free from the moral restraints of home, the boy soon gets into all kinds of trouble. He finds himself doing disgusting things that fill him with shame and self-loathing. Tired, ashamed, and hungry – he finally comes to himself and says, “I’d be better off as one of my father’s servants.” So he puts pride aside and humbly returns home, a beaten man. On his way he rehearses a confession of sin. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

Meanwhile, his father waits. Every day he stands at the window looking for his boy. Every evening he walks to the end of the sidewalk and looks up and down the road hoping to see him return. Then, one day he sees him in the distance. Throwing dignity and pride aside, the father runs down the road, throws his arms around his son and kisses him. The boy begins to confess his sins but his father interrupts his confession. He’s not interested in his son’s *mea culpa*. Instead, he gives orders for a feast to be prepared. “Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.” And that brings us full circle to the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them.

But the story of the prodigal son doesn’t end with the father welcoming and eating with his prodigal son. The story continues. Jesus says that the father’s “elder son was in the field.” The word “elder” in Greek is *presbuteros* from which we get the word *Presbyterian*. When the Presbyterian brother heard that his father had welcomed and was eating with the prodigal son “he became angry and refused to go in.” The Presbyterian son *excluded* himself from the celebration because his father *included* the prodigal. In one of the saddest scenes in the Bible, we see the father leaving the celebration. He goes outside and pleads with his Presbyterian son to enter into the joy of the celebration. <sup>Because that is Christ loves to eat with church people too.</sup> But his son refuses to go in. “Listen! All these years I’ve slaved for you and you never gave me a party.” The older brother goes on, “I’ve been chaste in singleness and faithful in marriage – but when this son of yours returns having spent his money on prostitutes you kill the fatted calf for him.” His father continues to plead, “Son, you are always with me - *always*, and all that is mine is yours, - *everything*. Son – there’s been a party going on <sup>all around</sup> all your life if you’d just enter in.”

So the story Jesus told ends leaving all kinds of unanswered question. Did the elder brother ever join the party? Did the prodigal brother really repent? With whom do you identify? With the younger brother – the prodigal son? Or are you the elder brother - the good Presbyterian who has been a faithful member of this congregation for years and years, tithing your income, slaving away in the kitchen, spending hours in worship and Sunday school and in committees? Does it bother you that in a few weeks we're going to be welcoming 30 new members after only one afternoon of lunch and orientation. Who do you identify with? I encourage all of us to identify with Christ. God has chosen us not to exclude others, but to include those outside. God has destined us to become more and more like Christ – who welcomed the unchurched and loved eating with them.

Let us pray: Gracious God we thank you for your great mercy given to us in ~~this sacrament~~ whereby we are made partakers of Christ. So fill us with your Holy Spirit that the life of Jesus may be seen more clearly in us and the remainder of our days be spent in your love and service.