

June 24, 2018 The Guest Pt. 1 Matthew 9:9-13

It's not news that we enjoy food. This congregation, St. Andrew's, Stirling, has the consistently most elaborate coffee hour following service of any other congregation in Kingston Presbytery. We come to worship and we expect to stay...sometimes for more than an hour, after worship. We drink coffee and we ate cake. We drink coffee and we eat fruit. We drink coffee and juice and tea and we eat cookies. And as often as we think we have reason to do so, we expand that refreshment time into an actual meal. Some would say we always serve lunch after worship. A friend of mine at St. Columba Presbyterian in Belleville says, "The food is always good at Stirling." She is talking about our coffee hour. The late Eugene Burrell said to me, "I just come for the food. They usually send me home with enough for dinner in the evening." Anyone who knew Eugene knows he was joking. But there is a reality behind the humour. We take fellowship seriously. And we assume, some of us "know" fellowship flowers when you have something to eat in one hand, and something to drink in the other.

What is news to some at least, is that there is Biblical warrant for that insight. The New Testament is replete with stories in which Jesus is a guest at someone's home and food is being served. There are at least 2 stories in the New Testament Gospels where Jesus was teaching and ministering to large crowds and he saw a need to provide food and

refreshment to everyone in the crowd because there were no nearby inns or restaurants where the people could take care of their need. So Jesus provided the food. And baskets of leftovers were gathered up when the meal had been eaten. We read of the disciples of Jesus, meaning a crowd of up to 120 in the Book of Acts gathering to worship, to pray and to break bread together. There was this real link between worship, spiritual pursuit, and the sharing of food to energize, (some would say to grease) the wheels of faithful fellowship.

This morning we are beginning an 8 part series of messages entitled The Guest. The situations, the circumstances, the people involved are very different in each instance. Eight stories. And yet the constant is that in each of these Gospel episodes Jesus is the guest in someone's home, and in every case food is provided. My daughter has taught me the phrase....Jesus loved a party! We will see HIM at a wedding feast. Definitely a party! In each one of these stories we are going to look at this summer... food is at least one of the reasons Jesus was present. An invitation was extended. Plans were made. Jesus accepted, wound up ministering to people who were present, or wound up being ministered unto, by someone who joined the party. In some cases there was controversy, and even conflict. But in every case Jesus was the guest, there for a reason, there in the unfolding history of God's reaching out to save the lost, to redeem sinners, to open the eyes of those who were convinced they did not have a problem.

We begin in Matthew chapter 9 verses 9-13. The story takes place in Galilee. Things I learned in Israel! At the beginning of chapter 9 we are told Jesus got into a boat and crossed the Sea of Galilee to his own town. It is not Nazareth. Jesus had been rejected there and never went back. His base of operations in the Galilee region became Capernaum. It is not home to HIM. Peter lives there. Jesus will continually be a guest in Peter's mother-in-law's house. At verse 13 it says "Jesus went on from there." He is on the move. Going to yet another of the many villages that surround that source of water which made Galilee a popular place to live.

As Jesus is walking by he spots Matthew (also called Levi) sitting in his booth which is the local tax office. Jesus issues an invitation, which is framed in the words of a command. "Follow me." And to our surprise Matthew responds. He simply rises and walks away from the life he has been living. Tax collectors were hated, and for good reason. They tended to be crooks. They set the tax rate to make a substantial profit. And of course they were Jews who were serving the Roman Empire. One Biblical commentator has made this statement. "Matthew's response to Jesus call to discipleship meant he lost a comfortable job but found a destiny. He lost a good income but he found honour. He lost security, but he found an adventure the likes of which he would never have dreamed."

Matthew apparently issued an invitation of his own in response to Jesus. He invited Jesus to his house for dinner. It was not a private appointment. They did not discuss what Matthew was getting into in his acceptance of discipleship. It has all the earmarks of a large party, with free food and drink and few if any regulating of who could attend. At Matthew's house there are many tax collectors, and sinners came and ate with Jesus and HIS disciples. There is also a sizeable contingent of Pharisees, conservative Jewish priests who calculate righteousness and faithfulness based on one's keeping track of obedience to the rules for living which abound in the Old Testament. The Pharisees ask Jesus disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and and sinners?" Their judgement is that Jesus is mixing with the wrong crowd, the wrong kind of people. These are not the religious elite of Israel!

Now, I am going to make a comment of my own here. If you think the Pharisees are not eating the free food, drinking the free wine, not participating in the party you are wrong. They are not standing against the wall with their arms folded. What am I saying? They are eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners too. And they are thinking they are not like Matthew, and they are not like Jesus, while they eat the food and drink the wine. In other words they are being hypocritical. Saying and thinking one thing, while doing the opposite. And Jesus hears about the fact they have asked how come Jesus eats with this sinful rabble.

A hush falls over the room. The majority are here to meet Jesus as Matthew's friend. The majority are here to listen to what Jesus has to say. In the quiet that descends Jesus says, "You wonder why I am here with these people? In this kind of setting, in this kind of gathering? It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." In other words he is saying at this party in Matthew's house... "these people need me." He is not about winning friends and building HIS reputation. He is about saving lives. And then Jesus throws the Bible scholars....and the Pharisees are Bible scholars... a homework assignment.

"Go and learn what this means." Jesus gives them a quotation from the prophet Hosea, 6:6. God is speaking through the prophet. And by the way, the Pharisees are not really comfortable with the writings of the prophets. If they had been around they would have been among the crowd that sought to destroy the prophets. In fact Jesus, like the prophets makes the Pharisees uncomfortable. Hosea says this in God's name, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings." Mercy rather than ritual. Acknowledging God's power and grace, rather than attendance to the sacrificial rituals at the Temple. I can picture the Pharisees with their mouths open. They are thinking, how dare he speak to us this way.

And what has Jesus said? We need to hear it and we need to value it more than what we think is our goodness. God desires that we be merciful and gracious, rather than

committed to our traditions, and rituals. More important than holy rules, is the acknowledgement of the God who is holy, the God who redeems, the God who seeks out and breaks bread with the sinful and the lowly.

All of this unfolded because Jesus was a guest, at a party in the home of Matthew who had become a disciple...and he wanted all his friends and anyone else who would come to his home and eat and drink to know it. I am a follower of Jesus!

Let us pray;

Lord help us to be more like Matthew,,,,wanting the world to know that we are YOUR followers. Eager to celebrate and host parties in YOUR name, and to give YOU the glory. Grant that we may be mindful that YOU have saved us. That YOU are the physician our spirits and minds need most of all. Receive our praise. Direct our service. Bless our efforts offered in YOUR name. Amen