

“Eating with Sinners”

I don't know about you – but I really like it when things are straightforward. We have that here in our text – as our Lord Jesus calls, and Matthew follows Him. Which sets us up for the straightforward question about our text – are you like Matthew, or like the Pharisees? Are you willing and anxious to follow Jesus – or are you disgusted by Him, and stay away?

But hold on a moment – because what may SEEM straightforward, is not. Rather than read our thoughts into the text – we must listen to the Words of our text and be led by our Lord. Our straightforward approach misses what the text is truly about.

You see, sometimes we respond like Matthew – and sometimes we don't. There are times when you hear and follow Jesus – times when you gladly take on the challenge the Lord has given – or, in faith, defy your sinful flesh. There are times when you give of yourself and your possessions for the sake of others, and for the work of Christ's Church.

And then, there are times when you can't be bothered. Times when you are disgusted by God's holy and chosen people – because they don't appear to be very holy – and you certainly wouldn't choose them.

The truth is that you are as faithful as St. Matthew and as fickle as the Pharisees – and that's why this text is not primarily about them, or you – but about Jesus! In Jesus we see the God who loves all sinners. Here we see the Jesus who came for and calls to Himself all who are sick and weary – all who are in need of the Great Physician.

Jesus makes a straightforward and obvious statement – that it is the sick who need a physician, not those who are well. What's not obvious is “who are the sick” and “who are the ones in need of a physician”? What may not be obvious to the Pharisees, or to us – is straightforward for Jesus.

We are selfish and greedy. We ignore rightful authority when it suits us. We purposely cheat someone out of something that we really want. We covet ... we lust ... we carry grudges ... God's name is not kept holy in our words and deeds. In other words – Jesus comes to us because WE are sick – because WE need the Physician's medicine.

He doesn't come because we have called Him – because we have made a decision that He will be our Lord. Jesus comes to us because we can't go to Him. He comes to us because we are dead in our trespasses and sin – so much so – that God's own Son must come and take on our human flesh and blood – becoming like us in every way, except without sin.

He alone is obedient to the Father, and righteous in His eyes. He alone is pure and holy and thoughtful and caring and loving and perfect in every way. He alone seeks and saves the lost.

Dearly beloved – you are the lost – and that's why the Lord Jesus comes, seeking you, calling you to Himself. You are “the sinners” – and that's why God's own Son comes into your midst today, and reclines at Table with you.

Do you hear what Jesus says? That He desires “mercy, and not sacrifice.” That means that you cannot satisfy God with your behavior, or with anything that you might offer to Him – thinking that it will earn His love and a place at His Table.

God doesn't want your possessions – or need your money – and it angers Him when these are offered in an attempt to distract Him from your sin. Such sacrifices will not work. You can't give anything, or provide anything, which will cause God to overlook your sin.

If God is to forgive your sins – to set aside your guilt and unworthiness – there must be something else. The price of salvation is nothing short of the suffering and death of God's own Son. The sacrifice of His beloved Son on the cross is required. The blood of the perfect Lamb of God – is required, and sufficient – to atone for the sin of the world.

Those who say they have no sin, see no need for this forgiveness. Those who are not ill, do not need this Physician. But those who are weak and frail – who acknowledge and confess their sin – these are the ones that Jesus calls to “follow me.”

Like the Pharisees, the world is appalled at a God who would associate with sinners – with those they despise, those they consider unredeemable, those they would not give the time of day. “Why does your teacher eat ...” with such people?

While the world may despise you (and the Teacher you follow) – the Lord Jesus is not ashamed to associate with you. The voice of the Living Christ called Matthew away from a life of greed and fraud to “follow me” – to live a new life, a life of faith, that treasures the grace and mercy of God which flows through His Son, Jesus Christ.

That same voice of the Living Christ has called you by His Word – washing you in His Holy Baptism – clothing you with His righteousness – that you may be His disciple, following Him in the new life of faith.

He comes and reclines at Table with you – that your hunger and thirst for peace with God might be satisfied by His Body and Blood. Here, in the Sacrament of the Altar, the sacrifice offered to God on the cross – now bestows on you the benefits of that sacrifice – the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

“For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” That is why Jesus has come – and comes even today – for sinners. Are you a sinner – weak, ill, despised by the world, unworthy of God’s love and mercy? Christ has come “for you.”

His sacrifice is for your new and everlasting life. His Table is set for you – to satisfy your guilty conscience, to strengthen your love for your fellow man, to anchor your faith in God’s grace.

Come, recline with Jesus at the Table He has prepared for you. Come and rest in His healing forgiveness – eradicating the fear of death, and incubating joy in His salvation. Come and sit with Jesus, living in the mercy of your Savior, who calls you to “follow me.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.