

The Man with Two Sons

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:1-2

Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons.” Luke 15:11

by Rev Karen Oehl

During Lent I have been offering a Sunday School class on Jesus at the Table. I always enjoy exploring what life was like in the time of Jesus, and it has been fun to research what foods were eaten and compare the ceremony of meals in those times with ours.

In addition to the fun historical and sociological information a study of Jesus at the table reveals how much teaching happened on these occasions; extremely radical teaching by the standards of his day. The ceremony of a formal meal was an occasion to show your importance, work patronage deals and cement your identity with the “in” group of society. Jesus turned these practices upside down again and again. He taught that you should show humility by taking the lowest place at the table. Invitations should not be sent only to those who would invite you back or to people whom you were showing off to others (a reason Jesus was probably invited sometimes to the homes of adversaries). Instead, invitations should be sent to the poor, the sick, the outcasts.

While we do not have the same kind of complicated social system around the ceremony of meals, it is clear that Jesus’ teaching can apply to any setting that functions the same way. Like church, our Sunday morning ceremonial gathering. The more I think about it, the more I squirm. How is it that although I consider myself a follower of Jesus and part of an institution that names itself “Christian” I keep seeing myself and our practices in the behavior of the Pharisees and legal experts?

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. They flocked to Jesus to listen to him. No other agenda. Not to prove him right or wrong or to ask him to give them special treatment. Jesus’ behavior appalled the religious people of his day. They were using their social media—grumbling—to discredit him. First, Jesus told them that the healthy don’t need a doctor, but the sick do. He had a mission to those who needed good news. Second, Jesus told parables. In Luke he tells three in response to the grumbling: a shepherd leaves the flock to find a lost sheep; a woman turns everything upside down to find a lost coin; a father holds a party when his lost son is found. We call this last the story of the Prodigal Son. But we need to hear again that it is the story of the man with two sons and see what God in Jesus was doing.

A shepherd, a housekeeper, a father. Where can we see God in our lives, and how does that change the way we eat, make friends and go to church?

*Jesus, much as I’d
like to see myself as
the child welcomed
home, I know I am
too often the
grumbler. Don’t let
me fall out of
selfishness and spite.
Amen.*

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