

PROPER 05 A

THE CALL OF SINNERS

The story is told of a family that moved into a new community.

They were promptly visited by two elders

and the pastor of a nearby church who cordially invited them

to attend the services on the Lord's Day.

The man assured them that he would come

just as soon as he got straightened out.

Several months passed, and he still had not put in an appearance,

so, the minister called again and repeated his invitation.

But he received the same reply.

The fellow had not yet gotten everything straightened out,

but he would be there just as soon as he did.

A few weeks later he died, and his widow

asked to have the funeral services in the church.

The preacher graciously agreed. It was indeed a sad affair.

Later when a member of the congregation asked the pastor

if the man was a Christian, he answered,

“He never attended services here,

and no one can recall ever hearing him

give a testimony of his faith in Christ, so I cannot say.

I only know he was a man of his word.

He promised to come to church

just as soon as he got straightened out – and he did!”

We believe that what our Gospel today is telling us is

that if we want to be one of Jesus' friends

we must recognize ourselves as sinners.

In fact, Jesus said, ***“I did not come to call the virtuous,***

but sinners.” Since most of us are sinners

and since most of us sinners do not really enjoy

hanging out with virtuous people anyway,

this is astoundingly good news.

Another story: An Episcopal priest who likes to have fun,

and, also likes to do personal evangelism witnessing,

had a special tee shirt designed.

The message on the tee shirt was in Greek.

It was a quote from one of the Gospels.

In English, it said, ***“he eats and drinks with sinners.”***

The priest would wear the tee shirt into bars.

Inevitably, he would be asked what the language was and what it meant. It usually provoked the question,

“Who eats and drinks with sinners?”

The answer, of course, was ***“Jesus.”*** This led to conversations.

One of the standard response lines was,

“Well, if Jesus wants to eat and drink with sinners, he has come to the right place.”

But we really do not have to go to bars to find a crowd of sinners.

Most of the people we see at church pass muster with Jesus on this point.

In fact, if you are not a sinner, you probably do not belong here!

In the gospel, Jesus called Matthew out of the customhouse to be his disciple. Matthew was a tax collector.

Tax collectors, back then, were not well thought of, to say the least.

When Matthew, a Jew, became a tax collector, people thought of him as a man

who had given up his religious heritage to become rich.

Jews were forbidden to serve the Roman government, and handling the Roman coinage

shattered the ritual purity code of the Jews.

Anytime you hear the phrase ***“tax collectors and sinners”***

in the gospels, know that the lowest of the low are being named.

Jesus ate dinner with them.

Eating a meal with someone is a serious sign of a relationship.

In courtship, the relationship is not going anywhere

unless the couple begins to share meals with each other.

One couple described a meal they shared

with a much-admired grandmother.

The grandmother, in fact, prepared a feast.

There were three kinds of meat.

It was summer so, there were fresh vegetables.

There was a cake and two kinds of pie.

There were hot rolls and hot corn bread.

The iced tea was ready by the gallon.

Since all of this was for three people,

there clearly was more going on than basic nutrition.

After the meal,

the couple could be public about their intention to marry.

The grandmother was public in her approval of the marriage.

There existed a bond of mutual affection and respect
between the grandmother
and the prospective granddaughter-in-law.

Everything was different, and yet, better.

Jesus eats with sinners. He does that to this very day.

The Holy Communion we share is a meal. It is a unique meal.

In it, Jesus is both the host, at the table,
and the food, placed in our hands. This meal has consequences.

The preparation for this meal is lavish.

There are things like a ***“fair linen”*** tablecloth.

There are people who take special care
with the dishes for this meal. The setting for the meal
is usually in a very special place.

Sometimes this space is created at great expense.

There is special clothing worn at this meal.

Most times there is glorious music.

On rare occasions incense is used to create a special aroma.

But the most costly and precious part of the preparation
is the part Jesus has done.

Jesus gave his life to create this meal. When we take the bread,

we take Jesus body. When we take the wine, we take Jesus' blood.

Jesus gave his life to prepare the feast of all feasts for us sinners.

And this holy meal had profound consequences.

For those of us sinners who know Jesus as Savior and Lord,

it is a time of joy, communion, being present, with peace and love.

But it has consequences for those sinners

that have not yet made it to the meal.

The text ends with Jesus saying to the virtuous and ritually pure,

that virtue and purity are not the object of godly life.

He quoted the prophet Hosea.

In Hosea 6:6 we read, "***What I want is love, not sacrifice;***

knowledge of God, not burnt offerings." Jesus quoted this text.

It goes along with loving your neighbor

as much as you love yourself.

Jesus is calling us to be a living consequence of his feast.

We are to pour out the love of God on the pain of this world we live in.

The feast the grandmother prepared in the story I told you

had consequences. There is a lively and vital marriage.

There are two children who have two children.

The great-great grandchildren,

will never know their great-great grandmother, in this world.

But the love and faith of the grandmother

has been shared down through generations.

Jesus is Savior and Lord for everyone

who was part of, or affected by, the grandmother's feast.

They are sinners of course.

But they are at the feast that Jesus eats with sinners.

If you are not yet at this feast, hear the call of Jesus,

get things straightened out and join in. Amen.