

## **“All Are Welcome”**

Luke 5:27-32

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Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

A three year-old girl listened intently to the Children’s Moment. The minister explained that God wants everyone to get along and love each other. “God wants us all to be one,” he said, to which the little girl replied, “But I don’t want to be one. I want to be four.”

Jesus Christ, the son of God, was sent to all as a special gift because God loves all of us, and there is no exception. This seems to be very easy and obvious, but like the little girl in the joke, some people still couldn’t fully understand what Jesus meant. All means all. God wants us all to be one as brothers and sisters in a family and love each other no matter who we are. Gender, different sexual orientation, ethnicity, and your social status are not barriers to be one family. There is no bound in God’s love. I realize that most people do not have any problem with God, but they have a problem with the church.

We have been learning about Jesus Christ and his ministry this month. Obviously, Jesus taught us a new way of life: salvation and eternal life. To make the Christian faith simple, these are the most important doctrines in Christianity: Salvation is a personal experience that God loves me, and eternal life is assurance that once we are connected and accepted to God by faith, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Jesus taught us how we can be a child of God. It is not a hard lesson, but it is a very easy one that we can follow.

Let’s revisit our reading again. When Jesus invited Levi, a tax collector, to be his followers, Levi held a great party for his master. And many of his colleagues and other people were eating with them. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law complained to Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Do you see what is happening here? The Pharisees and law teachers regard tax collectors and others as sinners according to their perspective based the law because they believe that tax collectors were sinners, so they were not supposed to have a meal with them. But Jesus and his disciples had a different attitude. Who is right?

We need to understand a little bit about tax collectors’ social status in Jesus’ day. Tax collectors were hated and despised because these Jewish tax collectors were working for the Romans by collecting Roman taxes. The tax collectors made a healthy commission, and they were the richest people in town. I have

researched tax collectors: There were several Roman taxes: a ground tax on which a Jewish farmer paid 10% of his grain and 20% of his fruit to the Romans; an income tax of 1%; a poll tax just for living; a travel tax to travel on Roman roads; an animal tax to take your animal on the Roman roads, etc. One Biblical commentator says that “tax collectors were universally hated and notoriously dishonest.” The tax collectors were considered unclean by the Jewish law. We recall in Luke 18:11 that “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector.’” In other words, tax collectors were in the same category as robbers.

Jesus sitting at the head of the table made the Pharisees angry. According to Israel’s customs, it was forbidden to sit at table with tax collectors and sinners. If you sat at a table with anyone, it meant that you were treating them as a brother or sister! With his way of doing things, Jesus was accepting the excluded and was treating them as brothers of the same family of God.

We are Methodists, which means we are “people of open minds, open hearts and open doors to others.” In the early Christian history in our States, Methodists were passionate about spreading out the Scripture and Holiness, being socially active and serving others, and they established many schools for the mission of the church. Methodists liked to have food at the gatherings. We enjoy meals as fellowship because we treat one another as brothers and sisters, not making any judgment on others.

Recently, I read Karen Armstrong’s religious scholarship about her research on other religions. She has studied the roots of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and even Buddhism. She found one common thing among these religions. **That is ‘compassion’**. In her article, she says even in the Torah, the law is to be compassionate, and everything else to be commentary. The point that Jesus showed to us is a compassionate attitude to others as God’s people. In our Christian faith, ‘compassion’ is the most important value that we need to keep in our heart when we practice our faith.

Compassion does not mean pity; it requires us to ‘feel’, not to judge others, but to put ourselves in other people’s shoes; to refuse to place ourselves in a separate, privileged category; to take responsibility for other people’s pain – even the pain of our ‘enemies’ – It is not sympathy, but apathy to ‘feel with others’. Compassion is a noun but you need to put it into your actions. No matter what you believe in your religion, we need to remember that our religious understanding can only come after practice. Jesus had a meal with tax collectors first, not after a long conversation with them. In James 2:17, “Faith without work is dead” is totally true to our understanding of our Christian faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, called Jesus “the man for others.” He wrote that, “Jesus is there only for others...faith is participation in this being of Jesus...the church is the church only when it exists for others.” For him, following Christ was a matter not of separating life into the church and the world, or the sacred and the secular, or the holy things of God and the ordinary things of daily life, but of seeing that it’s all the same thing.

Jesus Christ didn’t separate tax collectors from righteous people. Even Jesus spoke up, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.” (The Message)

Jesus was sent to us for the announcement of the Good News of God. We believe that he has come to us, not as a judge who condemns, but rather he is Father/Mother who accepts and embraces all of us. All means all! Jesus’ love knew no boundaries. Then, how about us? Last week, while I was preparing for Lanton’s memorial service (in November of 2006, Lanton family started Tongan language ministry with five families at our church), Lanton’s family shared their first memory about our church. When they visited our church for the first time, they experienced a warm welcome and loving hugs for acceptance, not questions and asking about who they were. They received an immediate and warm feeling of extended family from the first encounter. Isn’t it powerful? Church must be a place where all are welcome!

This is not only for the church, but it is also for us: Are your hearts and minds open to others? “What have I done to break down my barrier to others?” Or what can I do for others as Jesus’ follower? Let’s take this question seriously and practice it in our daily life.