

The Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5)  
St. Matthew 9:9-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Pharisee's asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" If you really think about it, it shows that they didn't know Jesus, didn't know about themselves or those with whom He ate. Who is Jesus? He's the Son of the Living God. He's the Christ, the Messiah. He is the sinners' Savior. That is what His name means: Jesus, Y'shua, "YHWH saves," that is, "I Am Salvation." There was no one among them or those with whom Jesus ate who is not a sinner. The same is true of everyone here. As St. Paul wrote, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." (1 Timothy 1:15)

Why did Jesus eat with sinners? Non-sinners don't need Him...they don't even recognize Him. Furthermore, if He did not eat with sinners, He would have to eat alone.

Now imagine if Jesus were to come today; not like the Second Coming coming, but coming, let's say, just for a visit. Where would He go to find sinners and eat with them? Like it or not, He would come right here. If you don't like that, consider what it is you just did at the beginning of this service; did you really mean it when you called yourself a poor, miserable sinner? So, unless you realize and confess that you are a sinner and even more the worst of all sinners, He does not invite you to eat with Him.

You are not here, or shouldn't be here, as the Pharisees, to show God how much you love Him or how much you have done for Him, to impress Him with endlessly repetitious words of prayer and petition or beautiful songs of praise. You are sinners gathered here by the Holy Spirit to receive the gifts God is present to give: forgiveness of sins, strengthening of faith, eternal life, and salvation. He invites you to eat with Him where He is both Divine Host and Divine Meal, for to give you those gifts, He feeds you with His Word and Sacrament. "...Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3b) "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." (John 6:55) Then, having fed you with Himself, He sends you forth into the sinful world to speak of the free forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake, eternal life, and salvation.

This is what Jesus meant when He said to Matthew, "Follow me."

There is a trap easy to fall into with this text. It goes a little something like this: If Jesus came to eat with sinners, and everyone is a sinner, then everyone will eat with Jesus in the end; everyone will be at the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. So, today's text is used to ignore or excuse all kinds of sin, because that's what Jesus did when He sat and ate with sinners and tax collectors, isn't it?

The trap can be avoided and the question answered if you take into account what Jesus had said earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matthew 7:21-23)

You have to remember that while Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, He didn't eat with all sinners (or tax collectors). Those with whom He ate, He taught, and to those who received Him and His teaching (that is, believed in His name), He gave the right to become children of God. (cf. John 1:12) That is the command that He gave to His baptized, as you may recall from last week: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Furthermore, St. Paul taught those who would mistake forgiveness, which is deliverance from sin, for license, which is permission to keep on sinning:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

False teachers tell you that you can continue in these things. They will ignore the part where Paul wrote, "And such *were* some of you..." And in order to nail the point home, Paul also wrote:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin... Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:1-6, 12-14)

So, to be sure, you are under grace. Though you are a sinner, you are forgiven of your sins and freed from it. This is the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. His sacrifice covers a multitude of sins and grants to man mercy. Therefore, God desires mercy. The sacrifice is complete; unfortunately, men still desire it.

By outward appearance and according to the works of men, Jesus sits at the table with sinners. But by the inner reality and according to the work of God, Jesus is host at the table with His saints—saints not given to their sin but sinners clothed in His righteousness.

Therefore, the Church, the very Bride of Christ, teaches repentance in the stead and by the command of Her Bridegroom—repentance, that is hatred for sin and turning away from it to the forgiveness Christ Jesus earned on Calvary. This is precisely what the prophet Hosea was speaking of when he said, "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." (Hosea 6:1-2)

Thanks be to God the Father, and His precious Son Jesus Christ, you are not doomed to live in your sin and damned to live without God. Some may choose to do so, led down that path by false teachers and a sense of pride contrary to the Word of God. But that is not you, dear Baptized, who have been gathered here by the Holy Spirit to hear and receive God's Word, and in it the forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation.

For Jesus has suffered, died, and risen for you. Every bit of the wrath of God spoken of by the prophets He has visited upon His Son, Jesus Christ, in your place. Only He could bear it all and die and rise again in order to give you the victory, and that is exactly what He has done (and why He eats with sinners and tax collectors). By way of Baptism, then, it can truly be said that in Christ you have been torn and stricken on the cross; so said St. Paul as was quoted earlier. John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; by pouring out His Holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death on Calvary some 2000 years ago He has forgiven the sins of the whole world. In the waters of Baptism, in the words of Holy Absolution, in the proclamation of the Gospel, in the body and blood of the Lord's Supper—in all of these things you have been revived and raised up with Christ to come and return to the Lord our God. For in these things the Lord Jesus Christ is present today to revive you, to raise you up, to forgive you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.