

Text: Luke 5:27-39
Date: 19th June 2022
Place: MUC
Theme: Meals as Enacted Grace

Introduction

This morning we begin a six-week study, based on the book '*A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table*', by Tim Chester.

Someone has commented that she has found the contents of the book a bit conservative for her. Personally, I don't necessarily disagree with her.

However, there are ideas that I have found interesting. For me it's a good book that explores the eating practices of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.

My reflection this morning is based on the Chapter one of the book.

Let us pray...

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Luke 7:34)

This astounding truth about Christ, along with the Bible's repeated use of food and feast related imagery, is the subject of Tim Chester's book. Chester's main burdens in this book are: *to explain the startling significance of Christ's desire to eat with sinners and Pharisees alike; to reveal the deeper spiritual realities that these shared meals with Christ point to; and to encourage us as Christians to make sharing meals an integral part of our fellowship with others, so as to regularly enact and reflect upon the grace that Christ so freely gave to us.*

I am sure by now most of you have heard of my love for food - eating and cooking. Many of my friends know that I am a 'foodie'. Food for the Chinese is not simply food; it has multiple layers of meaning. It is about hospitality, respect, generosity, friendships, connecting, relationships and love. Food is my love language. Few things bring me more pleasure and joy than preparing a meal for people I care about. It's one of the primary ways I show people I love them.

Sharing a table is one of the most uniquely human things we do. No other creature consumes its food at a table. And sharing a table with other people reminds us that there's more to food than fuel. We don't eat only for sustenance. Eating together promotes human connection. We're often most fully alive to others when sharing a meal. *"Few acts are more expressive of companionship than the shared meal... Someone with whom we share food is likely to be our friend, or well on the way to becoming one."*

In her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, theologian Christine Pohl has observed: *"A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality."*

For me hospitality is the foundation of Christian faith and an unconditional command of Christ. Extravagant hospitality is a great antidote for all kinds of tribalism. Often tribalism dictates who would be invited and who would be excluded. Tribalism leads to a narrowing of the guest list.

To understand the significance of Jesus eating with sinners we need to look at those who threw the complaint — the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These men were

the religious leaders of that time and had created their own set of rules referred to as the “tradition of the elders.” According to them, eating with a sinner defiled them, made them unclean. This was just one of their rules Jesus violated. Jesus ate with both the religious leaders and with sinners. The Pharisees saw this as scandalous.

Luke Chapter 5 verses 27-30: *“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?””*

I am aware that some of you don’t like the word ‘Sinners’ or for that matter the word ‘sin’. In preparation for this reflection, I came across a good explanation for the word ‘Sinners’

- * *In looking at Jesus’ behaviour, it’s important to understand what the term sinners meant in first-century Jewish life. It was a term defined by the religious establishment.*
- *The “sinners” were social outcasts. Some translations of the gospels put the word sinners in quotes to indicate that the term did not refer to sinful individuals, but more broadly to a well-defined social class that included a variety immoral people and, interestingly, most of the poor.*
- *The term “sinners” included people with immoral occupations like prostitutes, thieves, swindlers, gamblers and usurers.*
- *It also included people with “suspect” occupations, where the people were believed to engage in questionable practices like tax collectors, toll collectors, and money changers.*

- *Herdsmen, including shepherds, fell into this category because they were often believed to take their flocks onto other people's land for grazing.*
- *The category also included people with occupations that were considered ritually unclean, like butchers and physicians, who would come into contact with blood.*
- *These and other professions therefore carried with them a social stigma. People classified as sinners could not give testimony in court or hold public office."*

The "sinners" were social outcasts. And that's why the religious people were upset that Jesus ate and drank with tax-collectors and sinners. Dining together is a sign of inclusion, a sign of acceptance, a sign of friendship.

It's with this understanding that Chester sees Jesus's behaviour, eating with tax-collectors and sinners as scandalous too. He sees it as an enactment of grace.

According to Chester, *"In Luke 5:12-15 Jesus touches a leper. Normally if you did that, you become unclean. But instead of Jesus becoming unclean, The leper becomes clean. This is God's grace in action. God's grace welcomes the outcast and brings transformation."*

I believe the grace of God is radically subversive. The grace of God is radically inclusive. The grace of God is radically extravagant.

Running through Luke's Gospel is the message that the last day will involve a radical reversal in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

The meals of Jesus picture that day, as he welcomes the marginal and confronts the self-righteous and self-reliant. Grace turns the world of religious people upside down.

This true incident happened to Tony Campolo.

A few years ago, Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 a.m.

The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake and his stomach is growling. He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a scruffy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter.

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He drinks his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway.

Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just saying it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party

in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been coming here for years. Why do you want to know?" "Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday.

What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?" A cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it."

To cut the story short. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!"

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend.

Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!"

Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over. And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying.

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony. So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?"

And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes.

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There aren't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

What kind of church is Manningham Uniting Church?

A church that enacts extravagant grace?

Finally, according to Chester as we look further at the meals of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, we will discover:

- how God graciously includes those the world excludes;
- God's promise of an eternal banquet in a new creation;
- how we reflect God's welcome of us in the way we welcome others;
- how Jesus opens up the banquet through his death and resurrection;
- how the gracious invitation of God comes to us in the Word of God;
- how meals can express grace, community, and mission.

For me a follower of Jesus, a full meal —especially one shared with another— is symbolic of our reconciled relationship with God through Christ, and a pointer to the feast to come.