

July 9, Ordinary 14A (Romans 7:15–25a; Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30)

## **I would have been embarrassed, downright ashamed to be associated with gluttons, drunkards, and sinners.**

by [Joann H. Lee](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue

In one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he says, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Somehow these words have embedded themselves into my life of faith and my very being in a way that this week's Gospel lesson has not.

As an Asian American woman who was born in the United States and grew up in the Bible Belt, I have been conditioned to be all things to all people— quietly, without attracting attention to myself. My parents are loving and supportive; they also upheld these cultural norms. The society around us often reinforced them, too.

So I grew up believing that my role was to accommodate everyone else, to please everyone else, and to live up to the myth of being the model minority—a myth created to oppress, control, and divide communities of color in this country. I got good at towing the party line, at following the rules and echoing back what teachers and leaders wanted to hear.

For most of my life, church was not a place that challenged this understanding of myself and my role in this world. If anything, my faith seemed to add regulations, restricting even further what I could or could not do, demanding perfection and adding more pressure. In short, the yoke was not easy and my burden was not light.

I believed that if I were to be who God wanted me to be, it would require a lot more self-denial, a lot more perfection. The struggle Paul outlines in the Romans text was all too much a reality: "So I find it to be a law that when I do what is good, evil lies close at hand . . . making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" This kind of self-deprecating, guilt-ridden depiction of the life of faith resonates with me.

What I don't quite get is this Jesus who is described in the Gospel reading as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." I would have been embarrassed, downright ashamed to be associated with gluttons, drunkards, and sinners. And yet here we have the Son of God associating with those considered outcasts and sinners, even enjoying his time with them. I imagine Jesus laughing with ease, thoroughly delighting in their company.

What a threat he is to the rest of us who have so carefully crafted our reputations and résumés to prove how worthy and respectable we actually are! How dare he be so cavalier, so comfortable in his own skin. It is an affront to what we have built as a society.

And yet, to be a Christian means to be like Christ: to love deeply enough, to live expansively enough, to have and to give so much grace and mercy that you are willing to put your reputation and even your life on the line for others and for your relationship with them. Jesus' words to us in Matthew are liberating and life-giving. They take us out of our guilt and the punishing glare of expectations and rules and place us lovingly into the embrace of God—reminding us of who we are and whose we are.

Our lives should not be about conforming to what people expect or want from us. Our faith should not be about a set of rules we fail to follow. It is about following Jesus, who was a radical, justice-seeking, law-breaking, lavish-love-giving person of ill repute. Jesus shook up the authorities; he challenged unfair systems and death-dealing policies. And he ate, and he laughed, and he drank. He knew how to enjoy life even as he critically engaged with it.

Many Calvinists talk a lot about "total depravity." I do not doubt that we are sinful, that we fall short of what God expects of us. But too much focus on our depravity as individuals can make us myopic in our faith. In Matthew Jesus talks about things hidden from the wise and intelligent and revealed to infants. Perhaps those hidden things amount to this: that we can lay down our heavy burdens and come to Jesus. That we can stop being so weary of all our failures and shortcomings and rest in a God whose love and mercies never fail, for they are new every morning.

We spend so much time guilt-ridden by our own individual shortcomings, preoccupied by our personal inability to be perfect, that we do not see how we all contribute to larger systems and structures that dehumanize and harm those whom

God has created. Our collective failings as a society get buried in our own personal endeavors for perfection.

Maybe it's because Jesus could dispense grace so easily that he could better see and challenge us on how we fall short. The truth is we are a culture hungry for profit and possessions, all too easily wooed by power and status—not just as individuals, but collectively. Too often, we are willing to look away from injustice if we can hide behind the crowd of anonymous faces who demand lower prices and better deals.

But just as Jesus liberates us from our own shackles, he frees us from maintaining the status quo—from upholding systems that must be dismantled. We need neither to conform to this world nor to sequester ourselves away from it. Instead, we have the ability and the responsibility, through Christ, to create change and transformation in this world.

It's perhaps startling that Jesus promises in Matthew that this yoke is easy and this burden light. But we share this responsibility with a God who cocreates and struggles with us in our efforts. God, in fact, initiates it. We simply respond, trusting in the One who is gentle and humble in heart.