

June 11, Ordinary 10A (Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26)

## **Sitting and talking with a boy from Ethiopia, I received a radical dinner invitation.**

by [Ron Ruthruff](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue

Reading Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus as a new law giver. Matthew tells the story of Jesus in a way that reflects significant connections to ancient Israel and the law of Moses. Matthew places Jesus' most significant sermon on a mountain. Jesus is a master teacher, attentive to the law.

In this week's text, Jesus sits in the house of Matthew, a tax collector who has invited his friends to dinner with his new friend, Jesus. The Pharisees and the disciples alike wonder how Jesus could be a teacher or rabbi and yet eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees raise this question with the disciples.

Table fellowship in the first century mediated communal relationships. It defined who did and did not hold power and social status. Who you ate with said who you were spiritually, socially, and economically. This is not so different from many of the tables we sit at today. The Pharisees ask a legitimate question: Why is Jesus doing this? He knows the holy intent of the law, yet he sits at the table of sinners—especially a tax collector, who in his very job description is complicit with and benefits from the Roman occupation.

I have many food-related memories from childhood. Food bank lines stacked with government-issued blocks of processed cheese my scrawny arms could barely carry. Mean lunch ladies who told me that free lunch kids like me could only have the white milk, not the chocolate milk. I learned early that food could divide people or make someone feel excluded. I learned the economic difference between white milk and chocolate.

I have other memories of food, such as my mother's fried chicken. I remember those rare Sundays when she wasn't working as a nurse's aide, when she would invite

folks from her church to Sunday dinner. It didn't really matter who you were—you would lose your sense of etiquette trying to negotiate your favorite piece of that golden brown bird. I learned that food could make one feel welcome. I learned that hospitality—and, symbolically, food—could not only mediate social relationships but even break boundaries. Whom we ate with could be inclusive and recalibrate relationships. It was always powerful to see my mother as host and pastors and parishioners as grateful guests.

For 27 years, I served at an organization in Seattle that worked with homeless and runaway adolescents. The work was made up of meeting kids on the street and then, through relationships, inviting them in to receive services that could help them exit the streets. A drop-in center included a clothing room, Ping-Pong and pool tables, showers, and laundry—all important emergency services. And a nightly dinner provided a key opportunity to build trusting friendships with kids skeptical of service providers.

One evening I noticed a young man sitting alone at a table in the drop-in center. I went over and began a conversation with him. He told me his parents were first-generation Americans from Ethiopia and that they didn't understand him anymore. He quickly grew silent, feeling he had shared too much, too soon. Trying to reengage, I turned the conversation to food and asked him if there was a good Ethiopian restaurant in Seattle.

He told me of a little place near where I live. When I assured him I would try it, he cautioned me: "It's very traditional; we all eat from the same bowl." I said I was familiar with the custom, but he shook his head as if to say that I really didn't understand what I was saying yes to. He held out his hands, dirty from the streets, and asked, "Would you share a bowl with these hands?" Suddenly, this story from Matthew rushed to the front of my mind. This was Jesus in the house of Matthew.

There's another Matthean theme on display in this story: the book's interest in the care for and inclusion of all humanity. In the opening chapters, we find gentile women in the lineage of Jesus and gentile magi witnessing his birth. Here, Jesus sits at the table of a tax collector. While the Pharisees and the disciples each try to live in a way that sets them apart, Jesus at the house of Matthew demonstrates a radical form of hospitality: setting a bigger table, inverting hospitality, blending the lines between guest and host, recalibrating power, seeking relationship with all humankind. Divine love comes close to us all, to the sick who need a doctor, as Jesus

says.

Sitting in Matthew's home and with a boy from Ethiopia, I see a radical dinner invitation. Jesus, sent from the transcendent one, shows up to be with Matthew and his friends. No house uninhabitable, no hands too dirty. This is the Good News for us all.