

14th Sunday After Pentecost

Year C

11 September 2022

Although it is often characterized by sheer chaos, my husband and I make a concerted effort every night to sit and eat supper together as a family. Our children are four, three, and one-year-old, so as you may imagine, mealtimes are busy, loud, and very messy. Amid expressions big feelings, food on the floor (and sometimes the walls), and actually managing to eat ourselves, we are rewarded with nuggets of wisdom and wonderful insights straight out of the mouths of babes. Recently, our oldest son looked up from his plate in the middle of the meal and declared: “We are the Armstrong Family!”. His younger brother seconded his statement: “Yes, we are the Armstrongs!”. True, but what had made them think to say this? So, I asked. “Because we are eating together,” was their answer. This brief dinnertime interaction made me consider something that I have known to be true in other situations in life: who we eat with says something about who we are.

Eating, a simple act of sustaining our bodily needs, does indeed have social implications when meals are shared. Think of lunchtime at school: it can be cliquy. Groups of friends sit together. One high school comedy film shows a student ‘mapping’ the lunchroom for the new girl arriving from a different country, because where she chooses to sit on the first day will make a statement to the entire student body about who she is.

Before I started seminary, I worked with the Salvation Army in an under-resourced community in Toronto where many residents are poor. Several of my neighbours were sex workers. Once while sharing a meal together, an employee from a community outreach service offered me safety resources particular to their line of work; they assumed that I was a sex worker because they saw us eating together. Furthermore, I knew that I had been spoken to in a different manor than I would have had I met this outreach worker at a community roundtable, rather than while eating with my friends.

I share this story because it helps to illuminate why the Pharisees and scribes are so scandalized by Jesus sharing his meals with ‘sinners’. They grumble, making certain inferences about him because of the community that he surrounds himself with. Like we may make some assumptions about sex workers today, tax collectors had a certain kind of notoriety in the middle east of the first century. While being tasked with going door-to-door to collect taxes, many tax collectors would overcharge or extort money from people to line their own pockets. While offering a public service at face value, they were widely considered to be duplicitous; cheats and thieves, the lot of them. What did it say about Jesus to be seen eating with them?

When I was training for ministry with the Salvation Army in my former neighbourhood, a wise mentor warned me not to think of myself as being so different from my neighbours, particularly those who were sex workers. He said, “Sarah, you may think, ‘I could never do that,’ or, ‘I would never make that choice,’ but you have never experienced the kind of poverty that strips you of your choices. You are not so many steps away from that street corner as you think,”. The same thing could have been said about tax collectors. We may think that we could never steal or extort money from someone for our own personal gain, but we could. You and I may not have our own poor choices exposed so publicly, but surely we are sinners. Martin Luther and John Calvin are among the Reformers who describe each of us, all of humankind, as being “totally depraved”. Paul writes to the Church in Rome that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (cf. Romans 3:23).

These words are harsh. So too are the words of the Lord from our Old Testament reading this morning, as He speaks to the people of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah. Coming to church to hear about the impending destruction of God’s people, or their sins, or our own sins, is hardly an uplifting experience. And yet, the Old Testament includes some of the most frighteningly realistic descriptions of our world as it is. The key to not being stalled by our discomfort in reading these challenging passages of Scripture is to remember who God is: the Lord is Good. All the time. Full stop. Therefore, “The whole land shall be a desolation” is not prescriptive, but descriptive. God is not the force of destruction; the nations that surround Judah are. The judgment that Jeremiah speaks of is God allowing this to happen to Judah. After all, we have been gifted with free will. As I find myself saying daily to my own children, our choices have consequences, for good or ill. How painful it is for a parent when your child is going to be hurt, but you cannot protect them from the pain because they will not listen.

Though the people of Judah have departed from the Lord, He will not do the same to them. He says, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end”. God never cuts us off. This ought to be a source of great hope for us. We may feel as though we have made choices in life that there is really no coming back from; this is not true. We are never rejected, but instead we are pursued. Jesus answers the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees with a parable about a shepherd pursuing a lost sheep in the wilderness. When he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. God wants us to be with him. As we know, dear friends in Christ, “God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy. He welcomes sinners and invites them to his table.”

We are gathered here this morning, about to share a feast with one another in the Eucharist. If someone were to come by and see us all together, they may assume that we are all sinners by association. We are more than that. You see, the scribes and Pharisees made a fundamental error in assessing Jesus by who he eats with, because it is not the

sinners and tax collectors that say something about who He is; it is him who truthfully defines who they are. Not merely sinners, but sinners redeemed, fully. Not only redeemed but set apart; made Holy. So too it is with us. Who are we, as we gather at the Lord's table? We are the Church. We are Christ's own. We are members of His Body; for we all share in the one bread.