

Text: Matthew 9.9-13
St Stephen's

Sept 10th, 2006
Sat/Sun

A Meal With Jesus

We **love our independence**. We really love it. Our nation was founded on the Declaration of Independence. Our culture is filled with phrases like "I got to be me." "I did it my way."

We think that **happiness** is the result of independence, and that if I'm financially independent, if I'm relationally independent, if I am emotionally independent, then I will be happy. And yet, we have never had more unhappy people. We are lonely, fatigued, & fearful. Why? Because the truth is, happiness does not come from independence, but from **interdependence**.

Do you know why? Because **God made us like himself**, and **God is interdependent**. That is the profound truth behind sentences like, "God is love." The Son depends upon the Father and the Father depends upon the Son. The Son loves the Father and the Father loves the Son. God created us in his image, wired us for interdependence. Made us for giving and receiving love.

"Two are better than one... if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up"

Ecc 4:9-10

For the month of Sept we are bringing a message series on what God does in small groups. I hope you will join one. We are offering "**The Connection Event**" tonight for anyone who wants to join a small group. 25 tables... some will be groups who are welcoming new members. Some will be groups starting up...

It is not God's plan that you would walk through life alone. I am not talking about whether you're single or married. I am talking about whether you have Christian friends, brothers

and sisters, who share your life and strengthen your faith and carry your loads and watch your back. Walking through life with friends makes all the difference.

Three years ago we made a decision to **become a church of small groups**. We have always been a church **with small groups**, but now we want to take a bigger step and become a church of small groups.

What's the difference? Instead of being a church where small groups are **optional** – we want to be a church where they are **normal**. Where is it normal to circle up. So we circle up for fellowship, and worship and for discipleship. We circle up when we are taking on a task, or reaching out in mission. We are always building teams and groups.

Croc Dundee re some American who was having a hard time in life: "Awe, the fella just needs some mates, that's all."

True words!

From Our Membership Covenant:

I was Formed for God's Family, so I will gather with other believers in a small group fellowship that is a circle of Christ's care, growth and mission. I will guard the unity of my church by pursuing reconciliation and forgiveness when needed, and by honoring godly leadership. I will look to show all believers Christ's special love.

"Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." John 13:35

To **start off our message series**, I want to look today **a meal that Jesus** was having with people. Jesus was always having meals with people, and meals were tremendous times of connecting with each other and sharing your lives together.

Did you know that a Harvard study showed the **single greatest predictor of kids growing up trouble free and healthy** through High School and College is the frequency of family dinners! Because sharing a meal with someone is a tremendous time for connecting and loving and listening and growing.

I found out early in my pastorate that I could see people every Sunday for a year and have lots of time for little conversations along the way and not get to know them nearly as well as I would know them if **I was asked to their home** for dessert and coffee.

So when we look at the meals Jesus shared with people, you have to look at it through those glasses. **Jesus' meals with people were an important part of his life and message and work.** Meals in any culture, but especially in that culture, were very significant times of sharing lives. So you didn't just invite anyone over.

Our passage is from **Matthew 9**, and Matthew is a **tax collector**. Tax Collectors = collaborators and extortionists.

William Barclay: *"These tax gatherers were universally hated. They had entered the service of their country's conquerors, and they amassed their fortunes at the expense of their country's misfortunes. They were notoriously dishonest. By Jewish law a tax-gatherer was barred from the synagogue; he was included with things and beasts unclean... When Jesus called Matthew he called a man whom all men hated."*

A Good Question...

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Mt 9:10-11 (NIV)

That is a good question. Because they didn't. Ever. Not with tax-collectors and sinners. Do you know why?

They Were worried about Contamination

You know **how contamination works**. When you are healthy and get near someone who is sick, you catch their sickness. Every Mom and Dad of a school age kid learns this fast. Kids are always catching other kid's sicknesses. They get infected and come home.

This doesn't just happen with diseases. This also is an issue in our **moral development and our spiritual growth**. How do we say it? "*Bad company corrupts good morals.*"

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked

or stand in the way of sinners

or sit in the seat of mockers.

Ps 1:1 (NIV)

The **Pharisees** believed this. They knew that if you were spiritually and morally serious about God, **you shouldn't hang out** with traitors and sinners and losers. Because you would get infected.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

2 Co 6:14 (NIV)

The Pharisees were right. And it is a **good reason to join a small group**. Let me put it this way – are you **friends with people who lift your faith and raise your level of Christlikeness and deepen your devotion to God?** You need a circle of friends like that. Do you have one?

They Knew - Your Friendships Will Form Your Life

That is the importance of being in a circle of friends who share

your core commitments to Jesus and the Bible and the Gospel. Because **a team like that is essential to your spiritual health**. That's what joining a small group will do for you.

So why would Jesus hang out with tax collectors and sinners? **Their question stood**, and it needed... **A Good Answer...**

Here's what Jesus said. He hung out with them...

- **So Sick People Could Get Well**

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

Mt 9:12 (NIV)

This was something the **Pharisees never understood**; sick people need doctors. People like that weren't on their radar screen. But they were on Jesus'...

Jesus hung out with them...

- **So Lost People Could Find Mercy**

But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mt 9:13 (NIV)

People understood Jesus' answer about sick people needing doctors. But that wasn't good enough for the Pharisees. They would simply have **fallen back on scripture** and said, "What about Psalm 1? What about the holiness code of the OT? What about Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy? **What about the Bible?** And so Jesus responded from the Bible. *go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* He turned to Hosea 6 and told them they needed to **learn the bible better**, study it more, think about it more deeply...

What he was saying is that **the whole point of the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant is mercy**. Not religious ritual that creates judgmental hearts (clean on the outside but proud and callous on the inside) - but mercy that

flows to broken people and sick people and lost people and even – if they have ears to hear – proud Pharisees.

And so Jesus is hanging out with lost and sick people...

- **So Lonely People Could Find Family**

"His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ."

Eph. 1:5

Here is the remarkable thing that happens when **Jesus is welcomed into a circle** of lost and sick and lonely people. **Infection works in reverse!** Instead of us catching each other's diseases and sicknesses and lostness, we actually catch his health, his mercy, his forgiveness. Isaiah said that he bears our diseases and sins – and gives us his health and life and love.

When Matthew left his job to follow Jesus he **left a great deal behind** – a secure job, a lucrative income, but he also left a life of hatred and lostness.

He didn't leave everything behind, though. He **took with him** into his new life with Jesus a couple of interesting things – he took **his friends**. All his lost friends met Jesus. And he took **his pen**. That pen that he used to betray his people cheat his people he now used to record the words and deeds of Jesus. The Jesus who still can walk into any group, any circle of friends or co-workers – and make infection work in reverse, turning it into a place where sick people get well and lost people find mercy and lonely people find friends.

That's what happens in small groups when Jesus is welcomed and listened to and followed.