

## “Unlikely Guests”

Polo First United Methodist Church  
Polo, IL

Psalm 111  
Mark 2:13-17

January 29, 2012 (4<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany)

**Prayer:** Living God, help us to hear your Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe; and believing, we may follow your way in all faithfulness, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do. Amen.

Not too long ago one of the members of our Task Force committee was here in town and on his way to one of our meetings. Prior to coming to the meeting he decided to stop off at the library and get some of the snow off of the librarian’s car in the parking lot. While he was doing this, another man from the community approached him, and started to help him in this task.

The two men started talking as they each worked to dig the car out from the snow. The other man asked, “So what are you up to tonight?” I’ve got a meeting at church, the member responded. “Oh, really, what kind of meeting is that?” It’s a task force meeting. “Well, what’s a task force? I don’t know what that means.” It’s a group talking about the possibility of merging EUM and PUM. “Merging, eh . . . Which churches are those?” Oh, sorry, PUM is Polo First United Methodist the church right there across the street, and EUM is Emmanuel United Methodist out on Pines Road.

“You don’t say,” the other man went on, “My uncle used to be big in that church, but that was a while ago. Why would you guys want to merge? Is one of the churches in trouble?” This question caught the church member off guard. Uh... Oh, no, no one is in trouble, but we feel that since we’re both United Methodist churches with the same beliefs and mission that maybe it would make sense to have one church instead of two.

The conversation went on a little longer, until they had eventually succeeded in uncovering the Librarian’s car from the snow. Before the church member left to get to the meeting, the other man had one last word for him. “Well, good luck with that,” he said. And he walked away.

We have this other story about a dinner party. Take a look at the guest list and you’ll find a motley crew. Tax collectors, fishermen, disciples, sinners, and Jesus are all together at one table, sharing conversation, enjoying a meal together.

Then these guys from the community show up and peek in the windows to Levi’s house and ask the question, “What are you guys up to tonight?” They interrogate the disciples asking, “Why would you people be talking with these other people? Why is Jesus sharing a meal with these bunch of outcasts?”

Because the way these guys from the community, these Pharisees, saw it was that two different groups shouldn't interact like this. You've got the Jews and the Gentiles, and it wasn't appropriate for these two groups to talk with each other, and especially not share a meal together.

They viewed it as an issue of purity. Under the Jewish purity laws it was all about putting things in their proper places. Clean things or animals or people belonged in one place, while unclean things or animals or people were viewed as disgustingly out of place if found in the presence of clean things. They did this so as to stay distinct and separate as a people. It was also a way that they could avoid discomfort and maintain wholeness as a society and as a group.<sup>1</sup>

So you can see why these Pharisees would be up in arms about Jesus and his Jewish disciples sharing a meal with the Gentile tax collectors.

Maybe I'm completely off base here, but I think the anonymous community person shoveling snow was kind of asking the same question. Why would you guys want to merge? Why is this group of people, this church, talking with that group of people, that church?

Because in our society today we like to stay safe in our well defined groups. We want to stay distinct and separate from others who aren't like us. It's just a lot easier and more comfortable if that's the case.

Just look at the lunchroom of a local school, or the adult friends you keep . . . We tend to stick around people who are like ourselves. As one writer called it, there is a "self-selective intimacy" in our groupings which "reinforce the status quo."<sup>2</sup> And this creates a barrier between groups, whether they be: rich or poor, employer or employee, black or white, urban or rural, young or old.

Now, the distinctions that we make between people, these lines that we draw in the sand, don't revolve around ritual purity any longer, they center on appearance or social status, whether you're married or single, if you're cool or a dork, or even if you attend a United Methodist Church called Emmanuel or one called Polo First.

And just like the Pharisees asked the question after peering through Levi's windows, we might ask the same question if we saw any of these distinct groups mingling with each other. Why are those people hanging out with those people? Something is not right here? Something is off? This group belongs over there on Pines Road and this group belongs on the corner of Mason and Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible*

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word*

But in our lesson from the Gospel of Mark, we see that Jesus and those following him don't seem too concerned about these types of distinctions. God, in Jesus, is doing something completely new—so new that it doesn't fit any of the old categories. Maybe that's why this story we've read this morning is immediately followed by a story about how new wine is not put into old wineskins. Because what is happening here in the dinner party, in the motley crew that Jesus has called together, doesn't fit into the old system of viewing things, into the old system of classifying things, it's radically different and radically new.<sup>3</sup>

We see embodied in the meal at Levi's house, a new way of understanding not only ourselves but all of those around us. This new understanding comes out of the very character and identity of God. "Jesus' table fellowship reveals a God who welcomes all of us without reference to our [distinctions]. Where we were born, who our parents are, our physical appearance, how many degrees we hold, how much money we make, what we have accomplished in life, how old or healthy we are, [which church we attend] . . . All of us are welcome at God's table. *And so is everyone else.*"<sup>4</sup>

The only right we have to being at the table is because God has welcomed us. We are there for no other reason than that. Because we're all sinners. We're all sick and in need of healing. We're all unlikely guests, when God is the host.

But, and this is a huge but, through God's love in Jesus Christ we have been embraced with open arms and included in the fellowship of community. We're not cast aside as sickly sinners. We are embraced as children of God, and called together with a common mission to love God and each other and work toward the coming Kingdom.

Someone from the community might look through the windows and scoff and say, "Good luck with that." But we are assured that Jesus joins us at the table, joins us in our discussion, joins us in our meal, joins us in our work together.

Because that the kind of person Jesus is, and that's who he has made the Church to be. The Church is not a bunch of fragmented denominations and local churches completely disjointed or unrelated to each other. The Church is not a community "of perfect people doing great work. It's a [community] of forgiven sinners repaying their unpayable debt of love by working for Jesus' kingdom in every way they can," knowing that they are completely unworthy of the task without God present with them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL: 2011).

<sup>4</sup>*Feasting on the Word*

<sup>5</sup>N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (Harper Collins: New York: 2011).

That's why we join together at the table. To share a meal and join in conversation. To be forgiven and embraced as beloved children of God. To be strengthened on the way, as we work to carry Jesus' message to all people for years and years to come.

But most of all we join together at the table to be with Jesus. To be with Jesus together.

Amen.