

At the Table with God's People

by Lucinda Megill Legendre



Mark 2:15-17

15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

1 John 3: 16-22

16 By this we know love, that Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his sibling in need,

yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before God; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and God knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from God, because we keep God's commandments and do what pleases God.

I have a story today that seems to come directly from this passage in John. I know the truth of God's love for all creation and I try to live it out, but this spring reading this Truth condemned my heart. God knew the truth inside my heart and wiggled in to break open barriers I set up to God's love. I was loving in word but now I see the ways I was not acting in truth. There are so many things I wanted to talk about today, so many things in the world that are on my heart. But I am trusting God that this story of how the Spirit is working in me might be of use to others. So please take what you will from my story and use it to God's glory.

My name is Lucinda. My pronouns are she and her. I stand up in church from time to time and ask you to go places and do things like smile, give out stickers and tell people they are loved by God. I teach Sunday school and love to lead worship and I'm also in

charge of what we call “Outreach.” Aside from Pride and Outfest another piece of our outreach puzzle is an annual block party that started a few years ago as a vision Sarah Hill had, along with other Council members. We had read a book about developing a thriving church and through our discussions it became clear to those around the table that we need to a) have more fun and b) get outside our building, not just in a parade but on the sidewalk. Sarah for years had been volunteering at the University City Hospitality Coalition, which offers “meals of hospitality” six days a week at locations around University City[and they are looking for volunteers this summer]. She offered to invite the guests at these meals to our party. Beautiful I thought, thinking of the command in Luke, “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Invite the poor-CHECK! I thought as I created lists and spreadsheets. Not knowing later how God would use these folks and this table to bless me.

It was a good thing that Sarah invited folk from the meals to come, because despite our best effort at “outreach” handing out flyers in the week before in a Clark Park crowded with families...nada. Folks from Tab came, our mission partners came and the folks who needed a meal on a Saturday afternoon came. Last year, our second year, some college students from across the street came. Folks from the New Jerusalem community came and thankfully took our extra food. Our mail carrier grabbed a plate. And folks from the University City Hospitality Coalition came through. It felt so good to feed people. So

many Tab siblings worked together, brought a side dish, set up tables, and we fed each other. I don't do it often, so to physically make it possible for someone to have a meal--I savor the feeling. As Luke might put it, "I felt blessed." By inviting "the poor." I felt like we were doing something that the church should do, like we were listening to the Spirit's leading about what a small church can do to glorify God.

Council believes it too. They have talked about how we can make more opportunities to feed people by coming together as a community. This call to community---to service around a table is something that is so central to being Christian. But it's easy to forget the power of a shared meal. The power God most certainly knows when God people from the beginning are changed by gathering at the table. I had been going through the motions, skating on the surface of its power-- until I was reading *Inspired* by Rachel Held Evans. I started reading it last summer and loved it so much I begged to have us discuss it during tab.edu. Little did I know that only a few short months after our discussions of this powerful book, its 37 year-old author would die after a medical emergency that left her having uncontrollable seizures. Her death was shocking to me, not only because I had loved her book so much and have been changed (as you'll hear soon) by the Spirit speaking through her words. But I was also so shocked because she and I are the same age-both with young children. Someone else's mortality always seems to place mine in more stark contrast to the irrational invincibility I feel most days. So today, I hope to honor the life and work of a woman whom I would have liked to know as a friend. I

believe Rachel Held Evans is a prophet whose words pried open a crack of the seemingly smooth facade around my spiritual life and let the Holy Spirit pour in and make some good trouble.

The good trouble Rachel's book caused was helping me to realize how far my heart is from fully embracing the good news of Jesus Christ; and how I needed to change my thinking and examine my heart so I can be the follower of Christ I claim to be.

The first tears came when I read Rachel's holy retelling of the story of the woman at the well (when I cry, it's because I have said, heard, or felt something true). When I read this old story the parts I knew from the Bible were lovely and the way she developed the back story about who the woman was and why she was at the well when other women weren't there was powerful and thought-provoking. But it was the postlude of the story that stuck with me and brought me to tears although I wasn't quite sure why.

"We'll be fasting with the Samaritans tonight," he declared.

I'm certain that in spite of myself, I beamed.

I had to tell someone, but who? My household hated me. My friends were uneducated peasants with little influence over public affairs.

Would anyone believe me? Could anyone understand?

There was Miriam, of course, the slave. And Mara, the prostitute.

The baker always liked a good story, and maybe those shepherd boys would too.

As more names and faces came to my mind, my feet moved faster. I ran over the hillside and past the sycamore.

The widow next door could host a banquet. The blind beggar from the alley would certainly come. Perhaps the lepers of Ebal would join us for supper, and maybe a tax collector or two.

My feet pounded the ground as the town came into view.

We could gather figs, bake bread, drink wine, I thought. We could fill a house with hungry and thirsty people, people ready to laugh again,

and eat, and start something new. We could put flowers on the table.
We could sing old songs.
I made it all the way to Sychar before I even noticed.
I'd left my water jar behind." *pages 145-146 from Inspired by Rachel Held Evans.*

The joy of feasting with Jesus, of inviting everyone, of the open table--where is my joy like that? I wondered to myself. I could definitely relate to the party planning that the woman was doing, but the joy? where was mine.

Pages later when Rachel was telling about Jesus' ministry, about how the nature of Jesus' **life**, not just his death, is part of our salvation, I was again moved, but I didn't know why.

"The kingdom, Jesus taught, is right here--present yet hidden, immanent yet transcendent. It is at hand-among us and beyond us, now and not-yet. The kingdom of heaven, he said, belongs to the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for God....In this kingdom, many who are last will be first and many who are first will be last. The rich don't usually get it, Jesus said, but children always do.... And yet you'd never know it from the way many modern Christians talk about the gospel. "Jesus came to die," they often say, referring to a view of Christianity that reduces the gospel to a transaction, whereby God needed a spotless sacrifice to atone for the world;s sins and thus sacrificed Jesus on the cross so believers could go to heaven. ...Jesus didn't just "come to die." Jesus came to live--to teach, to heal, to tell stories, to protest, to turn over tables to touch people who weren't supposed to be touched and eat with people who weren't supposed to be eaten with, to break bread, to pour wine, to wash feet, to face temptation, to tick off the authorities, to fulfill Scripture, to forgive, to announce the start of a brand-new kingdom, to show us what that kingdom is like, to show us what God is like, to love his enemies to the point of death at their jangs and to beat death by rising from the grave.

Jesus did not simply die to save us from our sins; Jesus lived to save us from our sins. His life and teachings show us the way to liberation.” *pages 153-55 from Inspired by Rachel Held Evans.*

And then during another imagining, a retelling, kind of like adding color to old black and white photos. Rachel’s painting of the picture of the early church first, taught me to understand and be interested in the early church as I had never been interested before, but also she painted a picture of the kingdom of God that didn’t feel too far off.

“The sun has set over Laodicea, but Nympha’s house glows with lamplight and hums with comforting sounds of stifled laughter and hushed conversation. As soon as Aelia and Drucilla slip through the back door and into the crowded atrium together, they sense a stirring. There is news.

“What has happened?” Drucilla asks.

“Tychicus arrived from Colossae,” whispers a young widow, “with a letter from Paul.”

At this, Aelia’s heart leaps, for it means she gets to listen to Nympha read. It mesmerizes her every time--the way Nympha enunciates every syllable carefully, gently, sometimes pausing to explain the meaning of more difficult words or ideas, or to laugh forgivingly when one of those children throws a tantrum. Many at the gathering are women, slaves and poor laborers, unable to read the letters from the apostles on their own, though a few are wealthy tradesmen, the owners of sprawling households. A passerby would find it strange to see them sitting together for a meal, master breaking bread with his slave, a wealthy patroness pouring wine for a poor prostitute. But this is what makes them different; this is what makes them Christians.

Rachel’s story allowed the Spirit to ask me where I was in this story. Who was I sitting at the table with? Who are the folks that will make us say, “this is what makes us Christians” *pages 191-92 from Inspired by Rachel Held Evans.*

But why, the Spirit began to allow myself to ask, were these words ringing so much in my ears. Why was I so hung up on eating and sharing a meal? Then the Spirit prompted me

to ask: who, in Rachel's words, "am I not supported to be eating with" who would it be strange for someone to see me eating with, if they passed by. As if by bullhorn my soul answered its own question. The folks from the University City Hospitality Coalition, that's who. Folks experiencing homelessness. "the poor"

The bolt of lightning sizzled as my pretense was worn away, my sin revealed. I had no problem **servicing** "the poor" with a smile but I didn't really want to eat with them. In the quiet moments of the next few months, God would sneak in and revisit the discussion that had started between us. Why are you so afraid to talk to folks who come to Tab or to the block party? "It's because I'm scared I won't have anything to say" I told God, as if that excuse would be enough. "Why?" god prodded, knowing my heart but being patient with my silence, not knowing my own self and needing time to think on it....and after many months of silence on the topic I answered ..."because a lot of my actual, in person, conversations if I'm honest, sort of mostly, are about proving i'm a good person because of things I buy, or other ways I used my class and privilege." There I was, toothbrush in mouth, realizing how far I was from God's kingdom, I was scared that sitting with the people of God would show me out--that I would be laid bare for someone who uses my class privilege to feel good about myself.

We know that racism and white supremacy are in the air we breathe, classism is like that for me. I didn't think I had issues with classism, but I do. God has opened my heart to the

ways that I was taught to look down on folks that were poor. How I was taught to dress, act and present in a way that would never allow someone to think I was *gasp* poor. The idea that “good people” are not poor and that if you end up poor, needing free meals or government assistance that meant there really was something wrong with you. I know these things are not true, but deep down these lies still live, deep in my heart. God has been working for many years to show me the other way, to show me models and examples of how these lies hurt me and keep me from the kingdom of God--nevermind how they hurt others. I would like to blame Ronald Reagan and the racist myths of the “welfare queen” that still make it hard for me to give money to folks on the street even today. But for years God has been working to reveal these lies and help me move beyond them when I’m thinking about others. It is how I think about myself that God used Rachel’s words to change.

My families lack of ability to gratefully acknowledge how much government assistance they have gotten between my grandfather’s GI Bill, my great grandfather’s government job or even my parent’s homeowner tax credits are part of this lie I was taught to tell myself. The silence about how much my family and I have benefited from a system that hurts others set me up to believe that my comfortable upbringing was related to the hard work of my family alone. We were not poor because we were smart, good people. My parents are smart and good--but that’s not why I got to live a comfortable life.

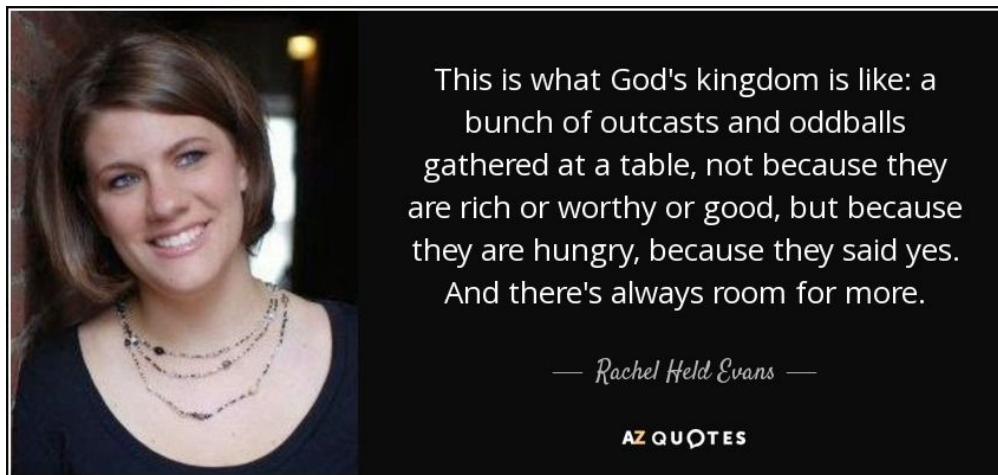
After reading Rachel’s words about being gathered around the table. God walked me through my heart to show me where I needed work. Like, “this is your life” God would

replay moments that formed my classism. During those times when I was driving long distances or in the silent meditation of brushing my teeth, God helped me see the lies about what it means to be poor and why people are poor. I've been unlearning so much of this over the last 15 years. But, just like working to be "anti-racist" doesn't mean I'm not racist--re-educating myself about the causes of inequality in my society doesn't erase the classist formation of my heart. And how these lies mess with my concept of what it means to be a child of God.

My classism has made me a person who struggles to experience the glory of God with my neighbors, because subconsciously I'm afraid that my consumerism, my classism will show. There is a social order built on lies that rob us of the Truth, BUT sharing a meal with folks who I am "not supposed to" be eating with defies the lies and lets in the Truth of God's great love. In the social order, I'm supposed to serve the poor because I'm a good person--not eat with them as equals, as siblings. When I read the story of the Pharisee interrogating Jesus want to identify with the tax collectors and the "sinners" more than I do with the Pharisee. But I so often don't. I need a doctor, I'm sick with the disease that taught me it's my job to provide a small portion of my wealth (not too much) to make myself feel slightly less guilty about our inherently unfair system. Serve the food, smile, clear the table and do the dishes and then go on my merry way before the reality of Jesus and God's love reveals to me that this is not supposed to be how it is. I'm supposed to clean up and get out before sharing what I have become a way of life, not an annual event. In God's kingdom, it's not okay for some folks to not have enough to

eat. It's not okay that folks sleep in shelters or on the street. In God's kingdom we take care of each other. We share what we have. In God's kingdom, I can't use the fair-trade clothes, modest house, organic food, electric car or other trappings of capitalism to help me feel good about myself. If I sit at the table with folk too long I might just realize what I already know **that if they are worthy of love just the way they are....then maybe I am too.**

It's not stuff or money or being successful that makes me worthy. I am worthy, just the way I am. Money, status, privilege and power are not what God is calling me to--these things don't make me more worthy of love. These are not the ways of God's kingdom. Justice, mercy, and unending love--these are God's ways.



Rachel says:

I have to remind myself of the glory inherent in being an oddball and an outcast in the kingdom of God. I don't want to be a Pharisee, Jesus didn't want to have dinner with them. I want to be the kind of person Jesus wants to hang out with. Someone who knows I don't have it all together.

[deep breath]

So, you should come to the block party, Saturday September 21st experience the kingdom of God. No pressure, but we do have a kingdom of God guarantee. Really, life-transforming, spiritual awakenings aside, it's a good time. Please come to the block party, help cook, clean set-up or clean up. Play with the kids, line dance with the pastor, pull up a chair at a table with someone you might not otherwise get to talk to. If I'm going to get to sit and be with God's people, I'm going to need your help. But the truth is that it won't even be sitting with folks that will change me--God has already used even the thought of the table to open a new avenue into my heart.

The truth is you don't have to be sitting across from someone experiencing homelessness to see God's face and realize that we are all worthy of love. I don't want to fetishize folks in deep poverty. They are not magical. In my case, God has used something the world taught me to be scared of, being poor, to give me an opportunity to rely on God instead. This might not be about classism for you. It might be about something else that God has sent prophets into your life to reveal. **Where do you keep your pride? What are you afraid of? What lies about yourself do you believe? Who are you "not supposed to sit with"? What makes you an oddball?**

When we're gathered in the vulnerable act of eating, we might find what we need to more fully experience the joy of God's kingdom. The amazing grace of saying yes to God and throwing a party where everyone is welcome.

My prayer for myself and this church however, is that this community may be like the early church. That we may be a gathering place of oddballs and outcasts. That we may share what we have. Where the hungry are fed and the down-hearted inspired, because share our gifts and take care of each other. My prayer is that those of us who “pass” outside of these walls as “normal” and “worthy” because of some privilege we might have, I pray that we can experience the freedom of God’s love in this place. That over a meal and some laughter we can strengthen our bonds so that we may share those things we hide from the world. I pray that those things that we consider failings, those things that might make us “unloveable” are **seen** in this community and celebrated as evidence of God’s great love. Because we are worthy, just as we are.

Once a year, and hopefully more often, we open the doors and put the tables outside to remind ourselves that there are no barriers to God’s love. That there are seats at the table for everyone. In God’s kingdom we are worthy to be celebrated just as we are. And God knows that sitting around a table can help us remember that. Jesus knew it. The early church knew it. It is God’s will that when we get up from the table that we are strengthened to take that joy and justice and love with us--spreading God’s kingdom wherever we go because the world surely needs it.

Amen.