

# Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

## Confession and Forgiveness

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The Gospel reading today began with an image of our Lord Jesus Christ at a dinner table. Henri Nouwen, a North American professor and a monk, wrote some beautiful words about eating together. He said:

The [diner] table is one of the most intimate places in our lives. It is there that we give ourselves to one another. When we say, "Take some more, let me serve you another plate, let me pour you another glass, don't be shy, enjoy it," we say a lot more than our words express. We invite our friends to become part of our lives. We want them to be nurtured by the same food and drink that nurture us. We desire communion. That is why a refusal to eat and drink what a host offers is so offensive. It feels like a rejection of an invitation to intimacy. Strange as it may sound, the table is the place where we want to become food for one another. Every breakfast, lunch, or dinner can become a time of growing communion with one another.

### 1. Jesus welcomes sinners in love

This is what *Henri Nouwen* said about eating together.

The *Pharisees* probably had a similar view; they knew that eating together is a spiritual matter, a matter of communion with one another. That is why they were so upset about our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was eating with the worst offenders of the law. He enjoyed meals with tax collectors and sinners.

Especially tax collectors were really hated in Israel; they did not only extort large amounts of money from law-abiding citizens, but they did so while on the payroll of the Roman army. These tax collectors collaborated with the enemy. And Jesus... he wined and dined with those people.

The laws of Israel were very clear; those who wanted to obey God, had to maintain their personal purity – if you were a good Jewish man, it was unthinkable to eat at the same table as evil offenders of the laws.

Jesus knew of course that the laws were clear in this respect, but he ate with those sinful people. This was not by coincidence. It did not just happen to him, and it was also not against his will. The opposite is true: He really welcomed these people to himself. “I *want* to be with you; I want to eat *with you*.”

I believe that this is exactly what makes our Lord Jesus Christ so incredibly attractive for ordinary sinners, for us, people who are not perfect. He invites people of *our* sort, that is: not so perfect people— to be with him, to eat with him.

Jesus Christ did not reject any person who loved to be in his presence. He actually became food for them, and for us.

The Lord Jesus Christ received people as they are, will all their warts and wrinkles, as he saw men as they are *essentially*: as creatures of God, and created in the image of God. The Pharisees only saw *sinners* when they looked at the same people.

When we sit in the metro, when we go shopping, when we drive our car through Cairo, do we see creatures of God, precious people beloved by the Creator of heaven and earth, or do we only see irritating ‘others’?

For the strict upholders of the laws of Israel, the behavior of Jesus was reprehensible: ‘You just cannot mix with people who do not perfectly obey every commandment of the law! You cannot relate on a friendly basis with people who refuse to carry the yoke of the laws of God!’

## **2. Jesus teaches truth**

Jesus had the opposite attitude. He knew that the yoke of the law was too heavy to carry for any person, *even* for the Pharisees. The law does not give any person the rest he or she needs. That is why Jesus invited people to come *to him* instead. ‘If the yoke of all the laws of God is too heavy to carry, come to me’, he says. ‘Take my yoke, and learn from me, for I will give you rest.’

‘Learn from me’. This was precisely what the tax collectors and the sinners, who were with Jesus at the dinner table, were doing. They gathered around Jesus to hear him. They wanted to listen to him, and learn from him, because he was the most attractive, most loving, most kind man they had ever met with.

Because the Pharisees understood nothing of this approach, Jesus told them some

parables, including the parable of the Prodigal Son that we have read. What Jesus actually shows, is that his own behavior is modeled on God, the heavenly Father. *He* accepts sinners; they can come back to him, even if their life is miserable and if all things are not in order yet.

Jesus invited sinners to come to him; he organized dinners to have true fellowship with them. Just as the father in the parable waited eagerly for the son to return, and just as the father immediately when his son returned, threw a large dinner party for him.

We read of the father that he was ‘filled with compassion’. He was ‘filled with compassion’ and forgave his son, a son who *did* return but whose life was still a mess. First acceptance, *then* change.

The tax collectors and sinners eating with Jesus were not perfect yet, and the son who returned to the father was still a miserable man. But they all rejoiced in the words of Psalm 32:1-2:

Blessed is he  
whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.  
Blessed is the man  
whose sin the LORD does not  
count against him.

Jesus Christ, in his earthly life, showed abundantly that he forgave sinners; God our Father also waits with open arms, to cover our sins. We can come to him, because our Creator through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, has done away with our sins. The way to God is wide open for all people, even for you and I.

But this forgiveness does not come cheaply. We know from the many stories in the Bible about our Lord Jesus Christ, that he received sinners as friends, that he showed them his great love, that forgiveness was available – but he also taught them to change their life.

Jesus made very clear that people had to change. They should stop doing evil, and follow him. In many respects, he *agreed* with the Pharisees - that people should obey the will of God. But while the Pharisees threw these ideas as fiery arrows at the people they kept a holy distance from, Jesus told people the same truth – but as a loving participant in their lives. Love, grace and forgiveness first, and then change as well.

It was exactly this context of love that made it possible for people to open their hearts and to confess their sins. When Pharisees avoid you, when so-

called holy people refuse to come close to you, you will not easily open up your heart for what they have to say. But in a context of being accepted, we are all better able to be honest about ourselves and our failures.

May we, as a church, be such loving community where people, all people, are received with real acceptance and love. We have our own struggles with this, as we sometimes behave like the Pharisees who begin their relationship with people by telling them what is wrong with them...

Most people do not like to be told where they are wrong. They already know all this, and they need an arm around the shoulder to feel accepted and to move away from their sins into a life with God.

In an environment where people do *not* feel at home, where they feel *rejected*, they will do what King David says in Psalm 32:

When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day  
long.  
For day and night  
your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

By accepting people and by showing them true love, we help them to open up, to no longer keep silent, so that they will be released of guilt, and inner pressure. In our life with our fellow men and women, we must not start with condemnation or by looking down on people, but by being a friend, by eating with them, by giving ourselves to them. If this is the environment we create, both personally and as a Church, for sure, tax collectors and sinners will open their hearts and minds for God, and confess their sins – as David did:

Then I acknowledged my sin to  
you  
and did not cover up my  
iniquity.  
I said, "I will confess  
my transgressions to the  
LORD"—  
and you forgave  
the guilt of my sin.

People need loving help to acknowledge their sins; to admit – just for ourselves – that something is intrinsically wrong with us, is so painful.

Think of the Prodigal Son... for a long time he suffered in poverty, even eating the food of the unclean pigs he was herding. To acknowledge his problems, and that in his father's

house life was so much better, was so hard for him.

And the next step, to get up, to leave the dirt, and to walk home, was also very demanding. To admit, visibly for all people, that you are a sinner and that you were wrong, and that you need to return to God, we all, I believe, experience this as something very shameful.

But admitting your mistakes, and telling God that you agree with his assessment of your life... telling him: 'I am not perfect, I make many mistakes. But thank you for accepting me through Jesus Christ....', that is very liberating.

Too keep it all inside can make our life so miserable, but to admit to God: 'I was wrong', can truly free us from a heavy burden.

But, I said it before, most people will only do this, if they have friends who truly accept them; if they see, exemplified by us, that our Master, Jesus Christ, is prepared to dine with them. When people experience that his Church on earth shows real love, only then have we created an environment where people are free to come to Jesus Christ, confess their sins, receive forgiveness, and set their life on a new course.

This is what Jesus did.

While eating with the tax collectors, in an environment of acceptance, he also taught them. He gathered people around him first, and then he taught them in line with Psalm 32:8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you

Even this teaching of God about the way we should go, maintains this aspect of acceptance: 'I will counsel you *and watch over you.*' God teaches us about how to live in an atmosphere of security.

The Pharisees could only accuse people, from a distance, of not keeping the laws. Jesus, with his approach of love, helped people to return to God, to live for God, and by doing so, Jesus truly honored the laws of God more than the Pharisees did.

### **3. Love and truth**

As a church of Jesus Christ, we must carefully balance love and truth. This balance does not mean that either love or truth suffers; the opposite is true. Love and truth need one another. They cannot exist without one another.

Love without truth is not true love; St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: 'Love rejoices in the truth.'

Love without truth can actually be dangerous: Just think of a medical doctor who wants to please his patient so much that he decides not to tell him that he needs urgent treatment in order not to die soon. A good doctor will sometimes hurt you, for your own benefit.

Love without truth can also be condescending: If you have a friend who only pets you on the shoulder, telling you that all you do is always perfect, you actually stop believing him after a while. The value of the compliment, of the kindness, is only real, when you also truthfully hear from your friend, what you do wrong. A good friend will sometimes tell you things you do not like to hear. For the sake of friendship.

True love is in need of truth.

But St Paul also tells us the opposite: in Ephesians 4 he writes, that Christians have to speak the truth *in love*. When we tell someone the truth, it must be done lovingly.

Truth without love is a disaster. It is cold like a razor blade, destroying one's personal value. If you only hear about your mistakes, and never feel an arm around your shoulder,

truth is destructive for your personality.

That is the truth of the Pharisees. What they say is mostly true, but because they throw it with accusations at those who do not follow God, people reject all that criticism and close their hearts for what they have to say.

The truth about our sins is a half-truth at best, if it is not mixed with the reality of the love of God for us. That sort of 'truth' is almost a lie. No wonder people reject it.

Jesus Christ is the full expression of the love of God – and he is also the Truth. When we come to him, he holds us tight, he eats with us, he shares himself with us. And in that safe context of acceptance and love, we also see the truth about ourselves.

*In the light of his love for us, we see the truth about us.* That may be hurting, yes, but his comforting love is above us, under us, before us, behind us, all around us, and that makes us free to listen to what God has to say to us.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus defends the fact that he eats with sinners, by pointing to his Father, who also welcomes every sinner who returns

to him. And he calls us to do likewise. To be a community that warmly receives any person in love.

If we, as individuals and as a Church, do not follow our Triune God, as welcoming hosts for all people, no wonder people have no interest in knowing that God.

But if we follow Jesus Christ, who stands like his Father with arms wide open, then we also open our arms, yes, our dinner table, to all people in need.

And we do not do this as if we are different, or better than anyone else.

We need to confess our own sins, and return to God, again and again.

Today our Lord Jesus Christ awaits us all with open arms. He invites us to his wonderful table, to experience his love. And he invites us to be truthful about whom we are, rejoicing in his forgiveness.

*+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*