



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Feasting and Fasting

#### Luke 5:27-39

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This morning we'll be looking at Luke 5:27-29. In the last part of verse 5 we saw the Pharisees gathering to evaluate and pass judgement on Jesus. He was preaching that with his coming the kingdom of God was breaking into the world. That was the very thing the Pharisees had been hoping and praying and working for. Their central task was to call Israel away from compromise with pagans and away from half-hearted obedience to *torah*—the law—so that the Lord would come as he had promised, to vindicate righteous Israel and to crush her enemies. The problem was that the kingdom Jesus was preaching—and especially the kingdom Jesus seemed to be creating—looked very different from what they envisioned. The Pharisees wanted to usher in the kingdom by *excluding* sinners. In stark contrast, Jesus was forgiving sinners and *welcoming* them.

And Jesus had answers that they couldn't refute. As they were evaluating him, Providence brought the paralytic. His friends lowered him through the roof and Jesus, seeing their faith, pronounced the man forgiven. That left the Pharisees gasping and fuming in outrage. In response, Jesus showed that he did indeed have both the power and the authority to forgive by asking the man to get up and walk. Jesus wasn't just talk. He didn't just forgive; he showed that he is Lord not only over sin, but of sickness, infirmity, and death—all the things that have come as a result

of our sin. In forgiving the paralytic, Jesus gave the man a taste of the tree of life—the source of life that has been out of our reach since the sin of Adam. Luke says that everyone was filled with amazement.

But in the next episode we see the Pharisees still following Jesus—still monitoring what he says and what he does. They didn't have an answer to the forgiveness he offered the paralytic, but they haven't given up either.

Luke leads into the next confrontation by telling us about Jesus' encounter with a man named Levi. Mark and Luke both call him Levi. Matthew tells of a similar encounter with a tax collector named Matthew and since there only seems to be one former tax collector amongst Jesus' disciples, it's probably safe to assume that Levi and Matthew are the same person. Whatever the case, as Jesus is visiting one of the towns of Galilee he approaches Levi as he had approached Peter and his fisherman friends.

**After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.** (Luke 5:27-28)

Nobody likes tax collectors, but tax collectors inhabited a particularly seedy part of society in the ancient world and especially so in Judaea. They were known for corruption. Tax collectors would compete for contracts with the government. The more they promised to collect, the more likely they were to win the bid. But they didn't just collect taxes. They padded their take, getting rich themselves. They had a reputation for being sleazy. No Roman wanted that kind of reputation, so they farmed the job out to locals. And

that meant that the locals didn't like the tax collectors either. They were collaborators with Rome. And that was especially bad in Judaea. For a Jew to be a tax collector was to be perpetually unclean because of the association the job had with gentiles, not to mention dishonesty. And so tax collectors were typically wealthy, but they were also social pariahs. They might throw great parties, but the only people who would come to those parties were other tax collectors and other social outcasts. And yet Jesus sees Levi, probably sitting along the road or at the city gate where he collected tolls and called to him, "Follow me."

Jesus had embraced a leper. Now he calls a tax collector to be one of his disciples. The Pharisees might have had trouble deciding which was worse. Both the leper and the tax collector were the epitome of the "outsider" in Jewish society. But Jesus seems to have singled out Levi for just that reason. Throughout his ministry so far, Jesus has been deliberately drawing the very people into the kingdom whom the Pharisees would have excluded and in Levi we see this dramatically played out. In fact, calling Levi leads to the perfect situation for Jesus, first, to illustrate dramatically what his kingdom looks like, and second, to confront the Pharisees again. It's as if Jesus knew they were watching and chose to do something that he knew would upset them and bring conflict.

Luke says that in response to Jesus' call, Levi left everything, got up, and followed Jesus. For Luke this is the language of repentance. It's not so much that Levi suddenly sold everything he had and became financially poor. As we'll see in the next verse, that's not what he did. Luke's point is that Levi chose to radically reorient his life around Jesus and around his message and

his kingdom. Is it odd that someone in Levi's position did this? We already saw in Chapter 3 that tax collectors had heard John's message of repentance and had asked to be baptized. Levi may very well have been one of them. He was ready for Jesus when he came. Levi would have been a man used to being ostracised by people; it would have meant a lot to him that Jesus, the man preaching God's kingdom, was so ready to embrace him and that, in fact, it wasn't that Levi approached Jesus and Jesus grudgingly accepted him, but that Jesus actually came to him first! Imagine what that spoke to someone like Levi—always an outcast with religious types.

In the next verse we get a sense of just how excited Levi was about all of this. Not only did he want to honour Jesus, but he wanted his friends to meet him—other outsiders. Look at verse 29:

**And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.**

Levi put his wealth and his connections with other outsiders to good use. He threw a party and invited his friends. Table fellowship is particularly intimate. We all have lots of acquaintances, but when you really want to get to know someone, you typically invite them to share a meal with you. Consider that every Sunday Jesus invites us to a meal at his Table and in that meal he draws us close and shares his very self with us. That's what meals are about and so it's no wonder that the great Sacrament of our fellowship with Jesus involves us gathering around his Table. Of course, it was for just this reason that observant Jews—and especially Pharisees—would *never* share a meal with the likes of Levi

and his friends. Even as Jews, these people were unclean because of their association and collaboration with gentiles and because they were unclean, so was their food. There might even have been some gentiles at the banquet. That was even worse. Remember that uncleanness was "catching". If you came into contact with something or someone unclean, you were then unclean.

But remember Jesus' encounter with the leper. Lepers were the epitome of impurity. No one—and I mean *no one*, touched a leper. And in that case it wasn't just an issue of ceremonial or ritual purity. Touch a leper and you might become a leper yourself! And yet Jesus reached out to the leper—he embraced him and instead of the impurity and the sickness of the leper infecting Jesus, just the opposite happened. Jesus' purity passed through that touch and cleansed the leper—it dealt with the sin and death that were destroying his soul and his body. And for the same reason, Jesus wasn't afraid of Levi's invitation to share a meal with a bunch of seedy tax collectors. Nothing could make Jesus unclean. In fact, precisely the opposite. Jesus took it as an opportunity. At the party he just might have the opportunity to forgive and to heal some of those people.

The Pharisees didn't see it that way. They only saw Jesus trying to undo all their work to create a pure community. They confront Jesus over his actions. Presumably this happened later. It doesn't seem likely that Levi would have invited Pharisees to his banquet or that the Pharisees would have put themselves in such a compromising situation.

**And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink**

**with tax collectors and sinners?"**  
(Luke 5:30)

They *grumbled*. If Jesus is so righteous, why is he socialising with the unclean? Why is he compromising his purity? More importantly, why is he compromising the purity of the covenant community and of God's kingdom? And this confrontation turns into the perfect opportunity for Jesus to explain his purpose and his ministry.

Notice that Luke had referred to Levi's guests as "tax collectors and *others*". The Pharisees label them as "tax collectors and *sinners*". For the Pharisees, these people, being "sinners" were living lives that weren't faithful to God. They were outside his salvation. They were the people that God would smite when he finally came in judgement. But for Jesus, that meant that these were "the poor"—they were the very people who needed to hear his "good news". They were captives who needed to be released. They were the blind who needed to be given their sight. Look now at verses 31-32:

**And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."**

Going back all the way to Exodus 15, to the time when he had just rescued the Israelites from the Egyptians, the Lord had spoken of himself as the healer of his people. If Israel would follow him and do what he commanded, he would provide healing—he would provide the very life lost because of sin. The duty of Israel's leaders was to shepherd the people: to guide them in the ways of the Lord's

righteousness and to call them back when they strayed—to keep them in that place of healing. And over and over, through the prophets, the Lord had condemned Israel’s leaders for doing just the opposite: for leading the sheep astray themselves or for taking advantage of the sheep when they were sick and weak. The Pharisees weren’t leaders *per se*, but they were guilty of the same thing. They wanted to drive the sick sheep out of the fold to make way for the Lord’s coming. Their fasting was hypocritical. In contrast, in Jesus the Lord had come, and he was deliberately going out to look for the sick so that he could heal them and draw them back to the fold, draw them back into God’s grace. And we see that Jesus’ kingdom is made up of all those who have repented their sins—who have set aside their old ways and embraced and reoriented their lives toward Jesus—people like Levi.

The Pharisees couldn’t wrap their heads around this and so they confront Jesus on another issue that, as it turns out, is directly related to the first and dramatically illustrates—once again—just what Jesus was all about. Look at verse 33:

**And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.”**

“Jesus,” they say, “for a man preaching God’s kingdom, you’re doing it all wrong. First you associate with tax collectors and sinners—the people outside God’s kingdom—and you and your disciples don’t fast and pray. Again, Jesus, you’re doing it wrong!” You see, in the practise of First Century Jews, you fasted and prayed when something was wrong. The

Pharisees fasted and they prayed for God to come and bring his kingdom—to vindicate the righteous and to punish the unrighteous. They even appeal to John’s disciples. Remember that John was preaching the coming of the kingdom too and, apparently, he and his disciples were fasting and praying for the coming of the kingdom. But Jesus, who is travelling around and preaching the kingdom and repentance, isn’t fasting at all. In fact, he and his disciples are attending rich parties like the one thrown by Levi.

**And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?”**  
(Luke 5:34)

In answer to their first charge, Jesus drew on the Old Testament language of the Lord as a healer. Now he draws on the Old Testament language of the Lord’s coming as a wedding banquet. The Pharisees were fasting in anticipation of the coming of the Lord to his people. When the Lord did finally come, that would be a great day for feasting, like a groom come for his bride. Fasting and praying *was* the right thing to do while they waited for the Messiah to come, but Jesus says, it’s not the right thing to do anymore, because the Messiah *has* come. Jesus portrays the Pharisees as killjoys who have crashed the wedding feast and want to take away all the food and wine, who want to end the party as the guests celebrate the groom coming for his bride. It’s not that fasting is bad; it’s that now isn’t the time for it. The groom has come—in Jesus the Lord has finally come to his people and is establishing his kingdom—and it’s time to celebrate. Jesus goes on in verse 35:

**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from**

**them, and then they will fast in those days.”**

Jesus is anticipating his coming death. Those days when he was in the grave would be just the sort of days when fasting would be appropriate, but at the present the appropriate thing to do was to celebrate the coming of the Messiah and the inauguration of his kingdom.

Luke tells us that to make this even clearer, Jesus told two parables. Again, Jesus continues with the wedding feast imagery. People put on their best, new clothes for a wedding feast and they drank lots of wine. Look at verses 38-39:

**“No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”**

In both of these illustrations Jesus stresses the incompatibility of fasting with the coming of the bridegroom. Trying to patch an old piece of clothing with a piece of cloth cut from a brand-new piece of clothing won’t work. You’ll only end up with a hole in your new shirt—making it worthless—and a patch that will shrink and tear your old shirt even more. And when it comes to wine, you can’t put new wine into old skins. The old skins are no longer flexible and will burst as the new wine continues to ferment. It’s not that the old is bad and the new is good or vice versa. Jesus’ point is that each has its

appropriate place. You can't mix them up. To fast during the feast is as shocking to the people of the kingdom as new wine is shocking to the palate when you're accustomed to old wine.

I'm reminded of the first time I made wine. I could tell from the smell that the fermentation process was doing what it was supposed to do, but I was still uncertain of my ability. Would it really turn out the way it was supposed to. When bottling day came I remember tasting the new wine. At first I was excited that it wasn't all that bad—it really was wine and it hadn't gone wrong in the process. But it wasn't that good either. It was sharp and biting. It was drinkable, but it wasn't all that pleasant. But people told me to bottle it and to store the bottles away so that it could age. That's what I did and I was pleased when I opened the first bottle, much later, and found that the wine had mellowed and grown richer. I've made a lot more wine since that first time. The first time I was tempted to drink the wine right away, but having tasted the aged wine, I'm no longer tempted to do that. I put it away and wait for the new wine to age, because I know that the old wine is better.

Again, there's a time and place for fasting, but in the presence of the king is not the time or place. At his ascension, Jesus left his people again, but he also gave us his Spirit, to strengthen, to equip, and to comfort us in his absence. Today we live in a time of both fasting and feasting as we await Jesus return. On the one hand his kingdom really is here and now in his Church. He inaugurated his kingdom when he came two thousand years ago and we're right to live as joyful people, celebrating the presence of our King among us. Each week he invites us to celebrate around his Table. He

reminds us here that as he called Levi, a tax collector, sinner, and man outside the grace of God, he has called us. As we've taken hold of him by faith in our baptism, he has washed us clean and adorned us as a beautiful bride. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of his grace and our redemption. And yet the Lord's Supper is also a reminder that the Groom is not physically present with us right now. He's gone to heaven to prepare a place. And so we wait here on earth for that coming great day when our Groom will return, bringing his glorious kingdom with him—one that will encompass a new heaven and earth, a grand temple made up of the entire cosmos—in which we, his resurrected bride, will celebrate his coming and his kingdom for all eternity, feasting at his eternal Table. But in anticipation of that great day, like the Pharisees and like John's disciples, we ought also to fast and pray. But unlike the Pharisees, our fasting and praying should lead us to do the work of the kingdom here on earth as we preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. Our fasting and praying should lead to an ingathering of "tax collectors and sinners" who, like us, leave everything to embrace and follow Jesus. Our fasting and praying should lead to an ever-growing number of saints surrounding the Table here on earth and to an ever-growing number chairs surrounding the table at that great eternal wedding feast. Our fasting and praying should lead not to exclusion from the kingdom, but an embracing, a healing, a making clean of sinners.

So, brothers and sisters, rejoice and feast at the Table today, celebrating the kingdom. We rejoice especially today as we welcome a new soul into that kingdom through Baptism. But fast and pray as well. Fast and pray that the kingdom will be ready when

our Lord returns. Fast and pray that he will lead us to the poor and to all those on the outside, that we might share with them the joy of the kingdom and of the forgiveness and healing to be found in King Jesus.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in Jesus and in your Church your kingdom has broken into the world. Let us live in the joy of your kingdom's reality and of the redemption we have found in Jesus. But remind us too to fast and pray as we await his return; to fast and pray that your Church might be presented pure and whole, a spotless bride on the day of that great feast when the bridegroom returns. We ask this through him. Amen.