

Jesus Was a Good Deipnosophist

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

25 February 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: James 2:8-13

Mark 2:13-17

“And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him.”

~ Mark 2:15

Prayer

God,

We do not live on bread alone,

Your Word of life is also a source of sustenance to all of us.

Feed us today with Christ’s teachings,

So that our faith may be renewed

And we may dare to live our lives as authentically and boldly

As Jesus lived his. Amen.

This morning, I am going to do something I have never done before. I am going to ask you to close your bulletin, put it down next to you or in the pew rack in front of you and I am going to invite you to have a little bit of fun with me. We are going to have a Spelling Bee moment in our worship service.

How many of you have had a chance to see the title of my sermon? Well, to make sure everyone knows it, this morning’s sermon title is “***Jesus Was a Good Deipnosophist.***”

I wonder if one of you would give a shot at spelling the noun, “deipnosophist,” which appears to have two acceptable pronunciations: “dairp’**n**asəfəst” and “deipno’**s**əfəst,” the prior being more widely used. So here is the word again:

Deipnosophist

Thank you, Liz, for spelling the word for us!

Does anyone know the meaning of the word? Any guesses?

“Deipnosophist” is a noun borrowed from the Greek.ⁱ It defines a person who is a master at the art of dining or, more precisely, a skilled table conversationalist.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

Before I go on, let me say thank-you for playing along and bringing a bit of lightness and laughter to our Lenten gathering today.

The British priest and theologian Harry Williams made the bold theological assertion that ***“Laughter is the purest form of our response to God’s acceptance of us. For when I laugh at myself I accept myself and when I laugh at other people in genuine mirth I accept them... For in laughter, I accept myself not because I’m some sort of super-person, but precisely because I’m not. There is nothing funny about a super-person. There is everything funny about a (person) who thinks (s/he) is... In much conventional contrition,”*** Williams noted, ***“there is a selfishness and pride which are scarcely hidden. In our desperate self-concern we blame ourselves for not being the super persons we think we really are. But in laughter we set light to ourselves. That is why laughter is the purest form of our response to God... For to set light to yourself is true humility. Pride cannot rise to levity. As G.K. Chesterton said, pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity... Laughter, on the other hand, is a sign of grace.”***ⁱⁱ

Oddly, historic churches like ours have been stereotyped as being unendurably dull and painfully joyless. There is still this misperception of the Church as a humorless religious institution that is in the business of restricting, containing, controlling and judging people. I remember one beautiful summer day when I was driving home after being part of a heart-stirring service at the church I served in Connecticut. The sun was out and there was a gentle breeze blowing in the city. The world seemed just a little brighter and lighter on that day. I wanted to let the warmth of the air and the bright light of that day in, so I rolled down my car windows, turned on the radio and, without even thinking about it, I started bobbing my head and moving my shoulders to the rhythm of the music. When I stopped at a red traffic light, I noticed a woman in the car alongside mine staring at me. Her windows were also down. I smiled at her. She responded by narrowing her eyes and shaking her head disapprovingly. Only then did I pay attention to the song lyrics blaring out of my radio. ***“I make them good girls go bad, I make them good girls go bad, good girls go bad.”*** I remembered that I was wearing my black shirt with the clerical collar. I am fairly certain that the woman thought I was a Catholic priest, which would have made the whole situation even more disconcerting for her. After having a second of internal panic, I turned down the radio and smiled at the lady driver again. She continued to shake her head until the light turned green, but before driving away the woman looked at me one last time and mouthed, ***“Shame on you!”***

I probably should have paid closer attention to the song on the radio, I will give that to the other driver, but it is consistently true that the tragedy of organized religion is that it can and often does take Scriptures, tradition, liturgy, rituals, doctrines, morality, and the longing for a righteous life so seriously that it shrinks the life of faith down to a dignified but unlaughable practice.

The Pharisees were not bad or hypocritical people at all, they took great pride in their earnest pursuit of the good life. Anti-Semitism in the Church has painted these serious observers of the Law of Moses as calculating, duplicitous, and bitter religious opponents of Jesus but, by and large, the Pharisees were people, Jews, who valued the commands of their faith tradition and were intent on living ethical lives in faithful obedience to God's Law. What often did baffle and irk them to no end was Jesus' light-heartedness and even playfulness. For the most part, the Pharisees had got their religious life down to a science. They studied the Torah diligently, obeyed all the 613 commandments of the Law, emphasized personal piety and steered clear of all wrongdoing, sin and the people considered to be sinners. Then, Jesus came along and began to color outside the lines. Rather than living by the rules, Jesus laughed, not in a derisive manner, but in a loving and mischievous way at the idea of an unsmiling religion that does not make room for the creative power and imaginative love of God, which combined are the loudest and most contagious laughter in the universe.

In the four short verses that we read from Mark's Gospel today, we experience a delightful taste of the levity of Jesus' ministry. The whole passage is quite comical! Jesus walks up to Levi, known as Matthew in the first Gospel, ⁱⁱⁱ who, of all places, is working at the local tax collection station, and Jesus invites this man to follow him.

In Roman occupied Palestine, being a tax-collector was not a way of life that helped you make a lot of friends. In the eyes of the Pharisees and most first century Jews, collecting taxes for the Empire was one way that Rome made them good Jewish boys go bad.

Throughout the Roman Empire, the collection of Imperial taxes was a franchise business operation sold to wealthy and well-connected brokers. These regional brokers hired people who lived in various towns and villages to function as local tax-collectors. Levi was one of these tax-booth operators. The entire system was ripe for exploitation and corruption and was solely based on self-interest. Rome specified how much it expected in net revenue, leaving it to the brokers and tax-collectors to determine how they would extract enough money from their own people to pay the Empire and secure their income. Because they knew the system would allow them to get away with it, the local tax-collectors set the rates high enough to pay the brokers' fee and line their pockets with their neighbors' hard-earned money.

Jesus knew very well what Levi's line of work was and how he had voluntarily chosen to get rich as a collaborator. I am sure Jesus could sense the disgusted looks from the people who stood in line to pay their taxes while he approached the booth. As a Galilean who grew up under Roman occupation, Jesus had heard tax-collectors like Levi be lumped together with thugs, scoundrels, traitors and other corrupt people known collectively as sinners. Still, right there in broad daylight, Jesus surprises and shocks everyone with an invitation to Levi to become his follower. And the Gospel says that Levi got up and followed. Frederick Buechner was right when he said, "**Faith is a word**

that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved.^{iv}

Funny enough, Mark tells us that it is Jesus who ends up following Levi to his house for dinner. Now, George Washington may have hand-written rule #56 from the French Jesuits' "*110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*," which offers this advice, "**Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; It is better to be alone, than to be in bad company,**"^v but Jesus never passed up an opportunity to hang around people with bad reputation. He ate with the bad boys. He dined with the despised well-to-do tax-collectors. He tabled with sinners. He accepted the table hospitality of someone who was considered to be bad company because Jesus was a consummate deipnosophist. See here it is that awesome word from the sermon title. Jesus knew that there is something deeply spiritual and life saving even about getting together with other people around a meal and he took great pleasure in being a deipnosophist – a person who loves and is very good at table conversation.

The Pharisees couldn't see past the kind of work Levi and his friends did and I don't blame them. It must have been upsetting to see Jesus, who was supposed to be this eloquent new teacher, powerful healer and spirited young rabbi that dared to forgive sins, eating, drinking, laughing and prattling the evening away with the same crowd that squeezed money out of the poor and the faithful to give to Rome. But Jesus was not interested in a serious religion that shames, criticizes, reproves, judges, condemns or excludes people. Jesus was very much aware of the human longing for connection with God and other human beings. He knew that there is in every single one of us a yearning to relate to others and to the world in a way that makes us feel fully accepted. Jesus met the tax-collectors and sinners at the table because he knew that conversation is still the backbone of community and, if done thoughtfully, a good chat over a meal is the best treatment for the self-concern and pride that break communities apart.

Companionship, laughter and a good chat over food remained Jesus' favorite way to extend God's love and mercy to others during his public ministry. He believed, and he was of course right, that the most meaningful way to share our faith is through the kind of table conversation that reveals that none of us are super-humans. The kind of table gathering that sets us light, allowing us to laugh at the heavy seriousness of some of our religious beliefs and practices. The kind of tabling that gives us the freedom to choose mercy over judgment.

Last Wednesday, it was heart-warming to see so many of you along with our siblings in the faith from South Acton Congregational Church and the United Church of Christ in Boxborough meeting at the table in Hartman Hall. I did not realize how much I had been longing for that kind of gathering where we are able to eat, drink, pray, talk and even laugh at ourselves and each other until I saw all of you together at the table. I was moved by the conversations that happened around the table even if no one really

paid much attention to the questions I prepared for the evening. You proved to be great deipnosophists! I could feel the levity of God's love in the air. And there was so much grace in the room. During Lent, we usually get serious about our religion. We make promises about what we will give up or take on and that's all very good and important, but I was delighted to see people laughing and sharing real life stuff with each other during the Lenten program. That's the kind of good energy, God energy, levity that creates communities of mercy, trust, laughter and grace!

I hope you will come to next Wednesday's gathering at South Acton Congregational Church to keep practicing this playful art of being a deipnosophist. Jesus knew that religion is not about the seriousness of traditions, rituals and beliefs; it's about the light-heartedness that fosters deep and transformative connections with others. It's about the freedom to laugh, to show mercy, to improve our capacity to accept each other, relate to each other and even love one another. And there's no better place to do that than around the table.

And if you are not able to participate in the Lenten program at South Acton, let your faith direct your feet to church on Friday, March 1st to attend the Brown Bag concert Liz is planning. Come to church at noon, enjoy 30 minutes of great Lenten music and then take your lunch to Hartman Hall and allow the levity of everyday table talk to make you more fully aware of God's grace and love.

Friends, this Lenten season, may you dare to make time for our Lenten practice of meeting at the table and, like Jesus, become good deipnosophists.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ *Deipnon* (meal, dinner) + *sophistēs* (clever or wise man), literally "wise men who converse learnedly at dinner or at meal-times."

ⁱⁱ H. A. Williams in *True to Experience*, p. 253.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 9:9.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner in *The Magnificent Defeat*, "Follow Me," p. 99.

^v By Doug Stanenart in *It's Better to Be Alone than to Be in Bad Company – George Washington*, The Leaders Institute, 27 June 2016 [<https://www.leadersinstitute.com/better-alone-bad-company-george-washington/>].