

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

June 8, 2008

Unexpected Guests

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hosea 6:1-6; Matthew 9:9-13

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. We have heard the phrase so many times that the shock value of it is lost on us. So, before we go any further with this passage and the insights it raises, we need to recover a sense of disgust. As Tom Long comments, “In first-century, Roman-occupied Palestine, one would probably not utter the words ‘tax collector’ without spitting.”

Just so you will understand, a tax collector in the days of Jesus is not analogous to an I.R.S. agent in 2008. I’ve known one or two of those folk over the years and, if anything, I’ve felt kind of bad for them. Like meter maids or property assessors, they do necessary work, but it’s hard to have a job in which no one welcomes you. However, the first-century tax collector was an agent of Rome, the despised, foreign occupier of Palestine. They were sell-outs and corrupt ones at that, profiting on behalf of the empire at the expense of their own people. To put this in theological terms, the tax collectors, or publicans as we sometimes refer to them, were very *unholy* people.

You may have a list in your mind of the unholy people of our own day. I know that I have a list: people that I am going to try and avoid, if at all possible. If I see them walking down the sidewalk, I may just cross the street and walk on the other side. I’m not going to sit down and eat with them. I am definitely not going to invite them into my home. Here’s a tough one that I really hate to admit: I’d rather they not walk into my church either. So you see, I think it’s the case that we all have a bit of the Pharisees within us.

The Pharisees had a desire to live a holy and righteous life. That means a life lived in the proper relationship with God. Let me tell you, there is nothing wrong with that goal. That should be our goal. It is Jesus' goal, too.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is how to make progress towards that goal. They want to get away from the world. Jesus wants to move towards it. They want to retreat into a controlled environment where they do not come into contact with the messy, difficult parts of life. Jesus wants to engage and transform those messy, difficult parts. The Pharisees want to avoid other people who might defile their efforts to be more holy. Jesus wants to be involved with the sick, the needy, and any who have been identified as sinners, unholy people. "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

If we are honest about it, we'd have to admit that the approach of the Pharisees is really the one which we are most comfortable with. We too try to avoid the unholy ones rather than engage and befriend them. We are concerned about being sullied by an association with them. We want to avoid the wrong kind of influences in our lives, and we are concerned for our children in these same matters. We teach them to be careful about their associates, choose their friends well. Sometimes, we even exercise a veto over their choices.

Some years ago, a good friend of mine was living in a small, poor community in Appalachia. After his daughter finished kindergarten, he and his wife decided to move to a different school district in a larger, wealthier community about thirty minutes away. Through these same friends, I had made the acquaintance of the father of another child in that kindergarten class.

This man never had much education, had fought in Vietnam, and returned to live in a tarpaper shack and do odd jobs in the coal mines or chopping wood to make a living. He was a

rough-looking character, but I knew him to be a gentle man. He was quite undone over the departure of our mutual friend and in an extraordinary conversation said to me, “They are moving out of town because they are afraid of what will happen to their little girl in our schools. They don’t see the positive things that their girl brings to her classmates, including my son. She is a good influence on them and helps all of the other children to be better students. I don’t have much hope for our children if the families who are educated and value their children’s education are always the first ones to leave.”

Fearing a negative influence, we may miss the chance to exercise a positive one.

Often in a church office, we receive phone calls from—how shall I put this?—people who want to get some money out of us for the wrong kind of reasons. I cannot say that they are not needy, because they have real needs, though money might not be the answer to their problems. I also do not want to call them undeserving, because they deserve help, though perhaps not the kind of help they request.

Not long ago, a man called the church office on a Saturday morning. I felt like I had made a mistake almost as soon as the receiver was at my ear. He claimed that he had been in an accident the previous week. “Likely story,” I thought to myself. And, in fact, the details of that story started slipping around. His daughter had been in a wreck. Or someone had been injured in the wreck. I had lost track of what he was explaining when he made his pitch. “I can’t afford the prescription the doctor gave us,” he claimed.

“Yeah, right,” I wanted to tell him, “and I’ll bet you just want me to hand you some money.” Sometimes I feel that I’ve been at this game too long.

I did ask him a few other perfunctory questions and found out he had already called half of the other churches in the phone book, but I also got from him the name of the pharmacy and

the name of the drug he said he needed to buy. I told him that I would get back to him, and frankly I could have left the whole matter right there.

However, I looked up the number of the pharmacy and made a phone call. As soon as I got to a real person and started to describe the situation to the pharmacist, he started laughing and said, "Let me guess, you've been talking with Mr. McSmith."

"Yes," I said, "that's the man."

"Well," the pharmacist continued, "he calls here a couple of times a week. He used to have a prescription with us, but now the doctor refuses to write it for him any longer."

"Is it a narcotic?" I asked.

"No," said the pharmacist, "but it is habit-forming, and people abuse it."

After just a few minutes of checking, I had confirmation of my gut reaction. The hasty judgment I had reached after a few minutes on the phone with Mr. McSmith was surely true. He was an addict, looking for a fix.

Again, I could have let the whole thing drop right there. "He didn't pull the wool over my eyes," I thought smugly. In other words my judgment was sound, and I was ready to carry out the sentence: "Ignore the fool. That will teach him!"

And then it came to me. A little voice in my head asked a persnickety question. "Teach him what?"

"What, exactly, will ignoring him teach that man? That the church doesn't care? That a Christian cannot listen to a cry for help, even if it's framed in the wrong way?" I knew that giving money would not help this man, but I also had to admit that neither would ignoring him or condemning him. The man needed help. There was no way that I could solve his problem, but I

could give him *some* help, or at least point him towards the One who could help him solve his problem.

So, I picked up the phone once again and dialed Mr. McSmith.

“Mr. McSmith,” I said, “I am calling you back from the Presbyterian church.”

There was a long pause on the other end. I surmised that he was trying to remember what churches he had called and what lies he had said to them. Maybe he was just shocked that anyone would call him back. Finally, he said, “Yes?”

“Mr. McSmith,” I continued, “After I spoke with you I called the pharmacy you mentioned and learned that the drug you want to buy is often abused. I cannot say for sure, but I have a strong sense that you have an addiction problem.”

There was no response on the other end, but he had not hung up; so I kept talking.

“I have in front of me a meeting schedule for Narcotics Anonymous,” I told him. “I am not a part of the group, but I know they would not mind my inviting you to their next meeting. It will be tonight at 7:30 p.m.” I also gave him the address and then continued, “They help a lot of people in their group. I know they can help you, if you go to the meeting. Do you think you can find your way to it?”

“Yes.” he said.

“That’s good,” I said and then pressed on. “I know it’s a very hard thing to break an addiction. That is why I want to do one more thing for you. I am going to pray for you that God will help you shake this thing. You will need a lot of strength, and God can provide that for you. I promise to pray for you, Mr. McSmith, and you can start praying, too. If you like, I can pray for you right here over the phone.”

He said, "O.K.," and so I did. Then, he said something I rarely hear in this type of phone call. "Thank you," he said. "You have treated me with respect."

That just about knocked me over. I was the one ready to falter at that point. "God bless you Mr. McSmith," I concluded, "I hope that you can get well."

"God bless you," he said. "Good bye."

What became of Mr. McSmith, I have no idea. I don't know if he went to the Narcotics Anonymous group. I don't know if he picked up the phone and started calling another church to get money. But I can say that I honored my promise to him and have included him, from time to time, in my prayers.

There is no miracle to tell, here, and that is not the point of my story, in any case. Rather, it is a story of how my own propensity to stand in judgment of another person almost prevented me from doing anything useful when a broken man looked to me and the church for help.

Have you sought of late the fellowship of any tax collectors or sinners? Now, before you howl "No!" in protest, before you list all the reasons why you would never have anything to do with *those* kinds of people, remember this: Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. We have heard the phrase so many times that the shock value of it is lost on us. But, here is the real shocker: Jesus welcomes the unholy people, and that includes us. We are the unexpected guests at his banquet meal. We are the outsiders no one wanted to welcome in. We are the sick who need a physician. We are the sinful ones who need God's mercy.