

The old joke goes that Jesus must have been Italian- His mother thought He was the Son of God; He hung out with twelve guys who had no jobs; He lived at home until He was 30; He and His father- St. Joseph- were carpenters in the union; He walked around saying (*exaggerated Italian-American accent*) “*Hey, do you know who my Father is?*” And He was always eating.

In the Gospels, and most especially in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is always eating- He’s always either going to a meal, or at a meal or leaving a meal- He’s always talking with people at a dinner or a celebration, and He’s always breaking bread with the people gathered around the table with Him. For Jesus, food was more than just nourishment- it was a chance to connect to the people you love and to share the good things you have been blessed with. And in that time and place most of them didn’t have much of anything, but because you shared what little you had, it became even more a sign of love.

And in that time and place, it meant a lot to eat with someone- it meant you were inviting them into your circle and that you recognized them as being worthy to eat with you- meals were symbols of welcome and recognition and friendship- and of course that got Jesus in trouble because He would always be eating with people who he shouldn’t have been eating with- the poor and the Romans and the tax collectors- aka the collaborators with Rome- and the sick and sinners in general- people his society didn’t want to recognize or welcome or have anyone be friends with.

And in today’s Gospel, who is Jesus eating with? A Pharisee- one of the religious leaders who He had so much trouble with and who persecuted Him and His disciples and who Jesus more than once- actually, many times- more than once cut down to size with His incredibly sharp tongue. Jesus called them hypocrites and whited sepulchers and blind fools and a brood of vipers- not very polite language, to say the least, and you can only imagine what the dinner conversation was like. And the meal we heard about today with a Pharisee is one of several recorded in the Gospels.

So why did Jesus eat with the Pharisees, His mortal enemies? Because they were not His enemies- they were His brothers, and like a good brother, He wanted them to wake up to what they were doing wrong- what they were saying and what they were representing to the people and to hopefully have a change of heart and manifest the goodness that was within them- that goodness which got covered up by greed for wealth and power; covered up by self-righteousness; covered up, but not unable to be gotten rid of. And the Pharisee- the person and not simply the religious authority- the child of God- the Pharisee was slowly being healed by that encounter with Jesus, even if he didn't know he needed to be healed.

Yes, Jesus was criticized by his disciples for eating with the Pharisees, but what did He care? He knew why He was here among us on earth and He knew He had to sometimes upend cultural and social norms and social niceties and even religious traditions to make His Father known and loved and to bring about the Kingdom of God, so that we could all be free of what prevented us from loving each other and taking care of one another, including sometimes cultural and social norms and religious traditions.

It's been said many times that, unlike the religious authorities of that time and place- and maybe even today- Jesus did not require that people change and go through a conversion before they were able to come to Him. No, being the profoundly humble man that He was, He came to them, and that encounter with this exceptional man- the face of God made visible- these people who were far from perfect and who were burdened by sin experienced an invitation to look at their lives and look at their God and see that this God was not turning them away because they weren't perfect.

This God was looking at them with love and inviting them to experience His forgiveness and His mercy and His grace and try again- and again and again if they had to. This God just wanted them to be with Him, and once they encountered Him and opened their hearts to Him, He welcomed them back with open arms.