

Tables Shared — Mercy and Mission

Summary of the August 16, 2026 Sermon

Rev. Jonathan Murray continues the *Tables Shared* series by returning to one of Luke's earliest table scenes, the calling of Levi in Luke 5. Jesus sees Levi, a tax collector defined by his profession and reputation, and simply says, *"Follow me."* Levi responds by leaving everything behind and hosting a banquet where Jesus sits among tax collectors and others considered disreputable. As the transcript notes, *"Levi gave a great banquet... and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them."*

The sermon emphasizes that tables are places where life is shared - where stories are told, assumptions are challenged, and unexpected relationships form. Rev. Murray highlights that Jesus does not merely welcome Levi into His own space; He enters Levi's home, his relationships, and his messiness. This becomes a central challenge for the church: not only welcoming people into *our* space but being willing to enter *theirs*.

The Pharisees question Jesus' choice of companions, asking, *"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"* Jesus responds with His mission statement: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* Rev. Murray explores the Greek word *metanoia*—repentance—as a change of direction, a reorientation of life. It is not shame, but an invitation into a new way of living.

The sermon then turns to Hosea's proclamation: *"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice."* Rev. Murray explains the richness of the Hebrew word *hesed*—steadfast love, mercy, covenant faithfulness—and connects it to Jesus' table practices. Jesus embodies *hesed* by entering relationships others avoid, sitting with people others label, and making mercy visible.

Rev. Murray challenges the congregation to consider the tables in their own lives. Most of us sit with people we already know, but the gospel invites us to expand our tables - literally and figuratively. He shares a story of a church that hosted community dinners where strangers became neighbors, and volunteers discovered that serving food was less transformative than sharing life.

The sermon warns against deciding who today's "tax collectors and sinners" are. Doing so repeats the Pharisees' mistake. The gospel is not about identifying the bad people; it is about recognizing that *all* of us need mercy. As the transcript states, *"The question is not who are the sinners, it's all of us. The question is where do I need the mercy of God?"*

Rev. Murray concludes with a simple, practical invitation: **Share a table with someone you don't normally eat with.** Ask about their story. Listen. Allow the relationship to reshape

you. Because Jesus' invitation to Levi leads not to a lecture, but to a table - and that table becomes the place where mercy takes on flesh.

The sermon closes with the reminder that Jesus' table is built not on worthiness but on mercy. When we live from that mercy - following Jesus, making room, sharing life - the world catches a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

As you're able, please remain standing for the reading of the gospel as it comes from chapter 5, beginning at verse 27. After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax collection station. And Jesus said to him, Follow me. And Levi got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house. And there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to Jesus' disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? 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. This is the word of the Lord. God is still speaking. Please be seated. There's something powerful about a table. A table can be a place where we celebrate. A table can be a place where we grieve. A place where we catch up with an old friend. A place we meet someone for the first time. Around a table we eat, yes, but we also tell stories. We laugh. We disagree. We learn things about one another that we might not ever discover in a hallway or even across the sanctuary. And sometimes around a table, something happens that we don't expect. A stranger becomes a friend. An outsider becomes part of the group. Someone we thought we understood turns out to be much more complicated than we thought, than that label we had given them. Sometimes around a table, we discover we are the one who needs to change. Not you, of course. It's always someone else. Over the next five weeks, we're going to spend some time at the tables that Jesus shares in the Gospel according to Luke. And Luke is filled with meals. We're not covering all of the meals, but we will encounter the people that Jesus gathers with. Because Jesus eats with disciples. He eats with strangers. He eats with Pharisees. He eats with people who are wealthy. He eats with people who are poor. He eats with people who are part of respectable society and others who are not. Again and again in Luke, Jesus finds himself at a table. But while the table is that place to eat, it becomes so much more. The table is a place or maybe even the place where the kingdom of God is most easily visible. The invitation of Jesus is not simply to feed people, it's to share life with people. Luke tells us, as we just read, after this, Jesus went out, saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax collecting station. And Jesus said to him, follow me. Levi's there, sitting at his tax booth, at his job. Jesus looks at him, not past him, not through him, not the label that he carries. Jesus looks at him and says, follow me. Two simple words. The Greek word is, and I can read and write Greek, but I can't pronounce it, *akaluthe*. And it means, quite literally, follow. But it implies joining someone on a journey. So Jesus is inviting Levi, come with me, walk with me, travel with me, become part of what I'm doing. And Luke tells us that Levi just gets up, left everything, and followed him. Now the Greek word for follow is *aphis*. Meaning to leave or to release or to let go. Not take a break, not go out for a smoke or grab a sip of water. It's leaving the position that

defined him. He leaves behind this identity that everybody had assigned to him. He leaves who he was so he can become part of what Jesus is doing. What does he do next? He throws a dinner party. Luke tells us, then Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. Can you imagine the guest list? Levi's friends, tax collectors, people with questionable reputations, people who have been seen as collaborators with the occupying Roman government. If we're honest, people, most of us, we would avoid. Jesus sits down with them. But what I find really interesting is that Jesus doesn't invite Levi to his table. Jesus is invited to Levi's house, to Levi's table, and he goes. That means Jesus is not merely welcoming people into space that he controls. Jesus enters someone else's space, someone else's home. someone else's story, someone else's relationships, and someone else's messiness. And that might be one of the most challenging parts of this story. Because it's relatively easy to say, everyone's welcome here. It's a whole other thing to say, I'm willing to go where you are comfortable. I'm willing to enter your neighborhood. I'm willing to sit at your table. I'm willing to listen to your story. I'm willing to eat food that I didn't prepare and I may not like. And that's the first question I think that Luke puts before us is who are the people whose tables we are willing to eat? Not just invited into our space. Whose space are we willing to enter? Whose story are we willing to hear? What people will we share a meal with that see the world differently than we do? Luke tells us the Pharisees and the scribes begin complaining. They ask, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Because eating with someone has meaning, especially in the ancient world. Meals were deeply relational. Sharing a table communicates, I accept you. I'm willing to be associated with you. We belong together. The religious leaders are questioning Jesus' community. They're saying, you're getting way too familiar with those people, the wrong people. But Jesus responds in that wonderful way of saying, it's not the well who need a doctor. It's the sick. And I've come to call not the righteous, but the sinners to repentance. And there are several key words there that I want to really highlight. First one's call, kaleo. To call, to someone, to invite. Jesus is not simply pointing out who is wrong. He's calling people into something new. I've come to call sinners to repentance. And that Greek word repentance is metanoia. It's a change of mind, a change of direction. It's a turning, a reorientation of life. My name is Jonathan. I've always gone by Jonathan. I don't go by John or Johnny or any other variation. Except once when I was a youth director. After about two years, the youth had gotten to know me very well, and they joked with me as well as I joked with them. And they coined a nickname for me, U-turn Johnny. Because I was both the driver and the navigator. So usually as we were driving down the road, going, okay, we should be getting, oh, there it was. And I'd have to make a U-turn. But that's what metanoia, repentance, really is. It's making a change of direction. almost frequently the opposite direction. Repentance isn't about a shame or a guilt. Jesus is not saying I've come to find

the sinners and point out all of the things that are wrong with you. He's saying I've come to invite people into a different way of living. Repentance is about accepting the wrong you have done to yourself or to others and desiring to engage a different way of life. It's turning to interact with the world in healthier and holier ways. And here's the irony of the story. The people sitting at the table with Jesus may have been the very people most ready to hear that invitation because they already knew something about themselves. They knew they were not perfect. They knew they needed something brand new. They knew they needed mercy, something few, if any, would offer them. Which takes us to Hosea. Centuries before Jesus sat at Levi's table, the prophet Hosea spoke these words from God. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. That Hebrew word translated steadfast love is *hesed*. Have you heard that word before? Do you know what it means? It's a hard word to translate because there is no single word equivalent in English. So it can mean steadfast love or loving kindness or covenant faithfulness or mercy or compassion or loyal love. God is saying through the prophet Hosea, I don't want religious performance. Come to church. Don't come to church. Live into God's love and mercy in all your relationships. God says, I want *hesed*. I want people who embody mercy. I want people who know God deeply enough that they will strive to live differently. I want relationship. I want love that becomes visible. I want worship that becomes compassion. I want faith that gets lived around the table. And Jesus takes that vision and embodies it. He doesn't simply preach mercy. He sits with people, questionable people, and He welcomes them. He's welcomed by them. He shares food with people that otherwise would not receive an invitation. He creates relationships where others see labels to be rejected. Think about the table or tables in your lives. Most of us have tables that are comfortable. We have our family table. We have the Thanksgiving table. We have the church fellowship table. We have the lunch table with friends that you'll probably be joining in about an hour. Most of the tables in our lives, we sit with people we already know. Nothing wrong with that. Jesus does that too. But what if at least occasionally we allowed our table to become a little less predictable of who would be around it. A number of years ago, a congregation, not unlike our own, decided to host a community dinner. They set the date. They prepared a simple meal. And of those who came, some were longtime church members. Some were people who had never entered the church or even a church before. Some were experiencing financial hardship, some were new to the community, some were older, some were younger. And at first, the church members sat together. It's what we do, right? We find people we already know. As the months went by, one of the volunteers began moving people around. Oh my gosh, why don't you sit here? You really need to meet her. Have you heard his story? And the tables started getting mixed up and slowly the faces around that table changed. The people who were serving discovered they were no longer simply serving. They were engaged. They were listening. They were laughing and they were eating.

After several meals, the most common comment wasn't, oh my gosh, look how much food we served. It was, I didn't know that person lived three blocks from me. There was this other person. We've lived in all of the same cities at different times and now we met here. The meal had accomplished something that the church could not accomplish simply by announcing a program. It opened the door for relationship. And that's where the gospel becomes tangible. One of the questions this series is going to ask us is what if the church was less concerned of getting people into the seats in the sanctuary and more concerned with building relationships around tables? Because seats can be anonymous. Even in this sanctuary, you can be anonymous if you choose to be. But tables are relational. Seat can be occupied, but a table is shared. A seat can say you are here, but a table says we belong. And this is especially important for us as a congregation. We live in a time when people are desperately hungry for connection. I'm an introvert. Whether you believe that or not is up to you. But I am an introvert. I not only enjoy quiet time, I seek out alone time. My wife found me once hiding in the closet because it was dark and quiet and I wasn't here, where's mom? But I need time to recharge. I need that alone time to process. But six years ago, the pandemic hit, and I found myself searching for a connection. And now I still seek out connection as much as I do quiet alone time. You likely, if you looked in your phone, you likely have dozens, if not hundreds of contacts in your phone, but it's still possible to feel lonely. If you're on social media, there are people that have thousands of followers and friends and still they question, does anyone really know me? I've heard from some of you, despite participating actively in the life and ministry of Christ at FPCL, there are still people, many around that you don't know. If I spoke their name to you, might go, I don't know that person. I haven't met them. I don't know anything about them. So what if one of the ways we participated in God's healing work was remarkably ordinary? We shared a meal. We made room at the table and we listened. We stayed long enough to learn not only their name, but something real about them. We became curious about someone else's story. We allowed ourselves to be changed by a relationship we did not expect. Now I'll also point out it'd be easy to hear this story and decide who the tax collectors and sinners are today. We might look around and go, oh, that's who Jesus would be eating with. And if we do that, we've missed the point, just like the Pharisees. Because the gospel is not Jesus ate with bad people, we should be kind to them. No. The gospel is Jesus comes to give mercy to all. The question is not who are the sinners, it's all of us. The question is where do I need the mercy of God? Where have I gotten things wrong? Where have I hurt someone? Where have I allowed fear to shape my relationships? Where do I need metanoia? Where do I need repentance? That may be the most important thing about Jesus' table. Jesus comes to transform everyone at the table. Levi is changed. The disciples are challenged. The Pharisees are confronted. All of us who encounter Jesus must answer a question. What kind of person am I becoming? Because if we sit at Jesus' table long enough, we will be

changed. Someone will challenge our assumptions. Someone will tell a story that complicates our opinion. Some will introduce us to a reality that we've never experienced. Someone we once avoided becomes a friend. We'll discover that our neighbor has been carrying a burden we never knew anything about. We'll discover that we have more in common than we imagined. We'll discover that the person we thought we were welcoming was actually the person God was using to welcome us. So as we continue these weeks together, I want to offer a simple invitation. It's not a complicated program. It's not something to add to your calendar. It's just an invitation. Share a table with someone. Someone that you don't normally eat with, someone you don't know very well, someone whose story you haven't heard, someone from a different generation, someone whose experiences are different than yours, someone you've disagreed with, someone who might not think they belong. And as you sit down, start with an interest. Tell me about yourself. What matters to you? If we're going to be friends, tell me three things I need to know about you. And then listen. Luke tells us that Levi leaves his booth and follows Jesus, but notice where Jesus' invitation of Levi leads. To a table. That is the pattern that we're given. Follow Jesus, make room, share life, practice mercy, become a community where grace is encountered. The central invitation of Luke chapter 5 is to allow the mercy of Jesus to reshape the way that we live with one another. Because Hosea tells us what God desires. Hesed, steadfast love and mercy. Luke shows us what that mercy looks like when it takes on flesh. Jesus' table is not built around our worthiness. It's built around God's mercy. And when we live from that mercy, the world begins to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Amen.