Sunday October 5, 1980

"WHY DOES YOUR TEACHER EAT WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS?"
Matthew 9:9-13

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The Pharisees and Scribes asked this question of the disciples of Jesus in a critical fashion. They knew that Jesus had had dinner with some of the most well known sinners in that town and they didn't like it.

The meaning of the question was this: "Why can't you disciples keep your teacher within decent limits?" Jesus was never one to stay behind the sanctified fences of accepted usage and tradition. He was always leaping over them into forbidden territory.

The same question that the Scribes and Pharisees asked about Jesus is asked today about the Christian Church. The words are different, but the meaning is the same. Here are some of the ways it is asked. "Why does the church let outsiders use its building?" "Why does the church get involved with those who need help the most--the poor, the sick, those in prison or in the County Jail?" "Why doesn't the minister spend more time with us the members of the congregation instead of helping others outside the congregation?

Or maybe our problem is that such questions are not asked enough about our churches. For the church not to get involved with the sore spots in society, involved with sinners and wrongdoers, those in trouble, is like asking a physician not to get involved with sick people.

Or what would we think of the crew of a lifesaving station who gave all their attention to the station itself; made the quarters more comfortable and attractive, planted gardens, designed uniforms, provided music and thus being pleasantly occupied, shut out the noise of the pounding waves which were driving people and ships to destruction on the rocks? Incredible!

Yet sometimes the church seems to be like that. We get so concerned about our internal workings that we forget God has called us to go among those outside the church and proclaim and act the Good News of God's love for all people. We forget that the church is not to be a private club existing primarily for its members. It's to be a life-saving station with a life-saving crew.

The church exists to a large degree for those who are not in it.

Yet people still ask of Jesus and his church--"Why do you spend so much time with sinners, with those who need help?"

Sometimes we exuse our inaction or our unwillingness to give money or otherwise get involved with those outside the church, or in another country, by reciting the cliche' "Charity begins at home." Whenever this saying is trotted out, it is to justify taking care of one's own before concerning one's self with the needs of others.

But this is not at all what the phrase originally meant. As first published in 1642, in Sir Thomas Brown's Religio Medici, it meant "charity" in the old English sense of "loving-kindness," not almsgiving or philanthropy. And as such it did not mean that we should first take care of our own, but that if we did not display loving-kindness to our family and our friends, then whatever almsgiving or philanthropy we engage in is done out of pride or vanity or ostentation, not out of deep human compassion.

I've known of some celebrated philanthropists who gave away huge sums of money to worthy causes of all sorts, but whose personal relationships were devoid of loving kindness, and who used public generosity as a cover for private meanness or even dishonesty.

Charity of course does not begin at home--it must begin where it is most needed, whether this be at home or in some remote Indian village. What needs to begin at home are love and respect and tender treatment of those closest to us--for unless we radiate such feelings in our daily intimate relationships, the money we give to others is simply a bribe, allowing us to maintain our self-esteem while we continue to injure the fabric of social life.

Today therefore I urge you to begin with loving-kindness at home and then at the same time to give generously to help those in need and to be specific to give to both the Deacon's Fund and the Neighbors-in-need offering

Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners? Because God loves all people, not just the righteous or the religious, or the Jews, or the Christians. "God so loved the <u>world</u> that he gave his only Son."

We can be sure too that God hears the prayers of all people: Jews and Christians and Hindus, and Buddhists, and Moslems and others. Perhaps you heard about the statement made by the Rev. Bailey Smith, who said, "It's interesting to me at great political rallies how you have a Protestant to pray, a Catholic to pray and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect to those dear people, my friends, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew."

To put it mildly, that's pure nonsense! It's very much like the Pharisees saying of Jesus--"Why do you spend time eating with tax-collectors and sinners, God is not concerned with them anyway." But Christ teaches us that God is more concerned about sinners than anyone else.

Why is it that so many religious people want to fence off God from others? It's just the opposite of what Jesus did!

Holy Communion is the meal to which Jesus invites us all--the self-righteous, the true righteous, the sinners, the doubters, the seekers, the lonely, the fearful, whatever you are--you are invited to eat this meal with Jesus Christ.

Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy lade and I will give you rest.
Today, you are invited to the Lord's Table with people from all around the world. Amen.