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The Lord's Table

Matthew 9:10

In the 12th chapter of Genesis Abraham is called by God to make a very strange journey. Abraham is to leave his homeland and set out for a mysterious destination. This is a journey in which Abraham is not in control. He doesn't know where he is going or what it will take for him to get there. But over time Abraham will learn that this is God's journey and the destination is more spiritual than geographical. On this journey Abraham grows in his understanding of who God is. He learns that God's love is not just for his family but for the whole human family. God's purpose is to use Abraham to bless all the peoples of the earth. The journey of Abraham teaches us that there are no boundaries to God's grace.

This truth about God was at the heart of the Swiss Reformation. It began in Zurich where the preaching of a young pastor named Huldrych Zwingli inspired people to think more deeply about who God is. The actual process of reform began in a very unusual way. Diarmaid MacCulloch describes what happened in these words:

It was a sausage that proved to be the rallying cry for the Swiss Reformation. Early in 1522, on the first Sunday in the penitential season of Lent, a Zurich printer, Christoph Froschauer, sat down with a suspiciously biblical tally of twelve friends or thereabouts, cut up two sausages, and distributed them to his guests. Zwingli sat out the sausage, alone among the company, but when the row became public (as was surely intended), he first devoted one of his Sunday sermons to showing why it was unnecessary to obey the traditional Church's order not to eat meat in Lent, and then published what he had preached. For Zwingli, it was a matter of Christian freedom...Zwingli's point in his sermon was that there was no Lenten commandment in the Gospel; it was a human command introduced by the Church, which might or might not be observed, but which obscured the real laws of God in the Gospel if it was made compulsory (*The Reformation: A History*, page 139).

Zwingli and his friends chose to use a meal which broke the rules to encourage people of faith to reconsider who God is. Is it the purpose of God to control what we eat during certain seasons of the year? Does God want rules that make it easy for us to know who is in and who is out? Is that what the Gospel is all about? Zwingli used this teaching opportunity to help people push out the boundaries they had constructed around God's grace. For Zwingli that meant taking seriously the central themes of scripture which emphasize God's love for the whole human family. In 1523 the city of Zurich did just that when it voted that the Bible should be the only source of doctrine for their churches. The old rules quickly disappeared.

In the 9th chapter of Matthew we find Jesus making similar use of a meal. We read that Jesus is at table with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is eating and drinking with people who are considered ritually "unclean." Everyone knows that tax collectors are traitors who squeeze money out of poor people to fund a Roman army of occupation. No one has to demonize them, they have already demonized themselves. Tax collectors and other "unclean" persons are not allowed in the synagogues

or permitted to have social interaction with people of faith. Jesus is blatantly breaking the rules. When religious leaders raise their voices in protest Jesus has the teaching opportunity that he wants. He directs his listeners to the words of the prophet Hosea that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Jesus then tells his critics to go and learn what that means.

Jesus makes clear that the Gospel is not about rules. The Gospel does not endorse our efforts to determine who is in and who is out. The idea that God is keeping score over who follows rules and who doesn't assumes that we can make ourselves worthy of God's love. Jesus eats with the most outlandish sinners he can find to demonstrate that no one is worthy. The tax collectors understand best of all that their presence at the Lord's table can only happen if there are no boundaries to God's grace.

As we gather at the Lord's table today, we can be full participants in Abraham's journey. Our communion liturgy says it like this:

*They will come from east and west,
And from north and south
And sit at table in the kingdom of God.*