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The company we keep

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"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:2

Church marquees, those lightbox structures displaying the sermon title or a scripture passage, are the first indication of what lies within. Who decides the wording gets to be the face of that church, the first impression.

I don't often see the sign above: "Come, eat with us sinners." There are lots of sermons preached about avoiding sin, but the logic of this includes avoiding sinners, meaning other people who are the occasions of sin. The real test of this is at the Communion table, where in some churches sinners must be turned away because Communion has come to be seen as a reward for being good, not as a means to forgiveness and healing. Good people fear contamination from bad people. If we have advanced in age and experience enough to know that good and bad come together in most of us, we are told to at least leave our failings in the confessional first, then come to Communion. Wash your hands, then come to the table.

The only way to get past this deeply ingrained theology is to go back to the source. Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. He said he was a physician and they were his patients. Where does it hurt, let me see, let me touch the place, come close. Eating was an intimate affair, everyone gathered around the common dish, leaning and dipping in with pieces of bread, talking face to face at close range, within the bubble of shared breath and personal scent. No hand sanitizers, spiritual or otherwise, to protect you. And he did this publicly, openly, coming under the scrutiny of the legalists and purists, who saw proof that Jesus must be one of them, a bad person.

Jesus shared bread and himself without condition, must have believed that contamination went both ways. Goodness is also contagious, mercy overcomes awkwardness. Let the hungry come and eat.

The two worlds, of Jesus' unconditional love and respectable religion with its rules and distinctions, do not come together simply or easily. Hospitality tends to blur worthiness in favor of spontaneity, makes for better parties, even as a touch of scandal makes for more interesting conversation. We will be judged by the company we keep.

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