

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time: Sept. 1, 2013

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Gospel Question: *What got Jesus killed?*

I work in ministry at a university. Every year, it is fun to watch the freshmen forming their eating groups. Whether in their Residence Halls, a snack somewhere on campus, or getting outside the University and exploring some local eateries, I learn a lot watching how they come together to eat. Sometimes, at the beginning of the year, their worst fear is finding no one to eat with at a meal time. Or, they are stuck at table with people who end up being a problem. Those gatherings of new and potential friends can become quite significant over the years. We are always looking for the “right” people to eat with. Many would rather get food and take it to their rooms than be at a table by themselves. With whom we share a meal is just that important to us. Are there any more welcomed words than when we find ourselves having to eat alone and we hear someone say: “Pull up a chair and join us for dinner?”

A woman widowed over a year ago, said to me just this week, “My loneliest times are dinner.”

When my dad moved into an independent living home with lots of other 80 and 90 year olds, he found out they have to all eat dinner together. And his biggest anxiety was establishing himself at the tables. “Who will invite me to eat with them? With whom will I eat?”

Do you know why Jesus was killed? He was killed because of who he ate with. Jesus was killed primarily because he refused to stop eating with the wrong people, with the unclean, with the outcast, with the sinners, heretics, his political foes. *

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To eat with another person in Jesus' day—and as I look around, still in our own—meant to share a world. To share a table meant that you believed you were a lot like the others you were eating - in values, faith and ways of life.

Jesus got killed because of who he ate with.

Jesus kept eating with people who the rest of the religious leaders of his day did not want to believe they shared anything with. By these dinners he attended, Jesus just kept rubbing in their faces that he believed God was bigger than following the law, that God was bigger than who was acting morally, that God was bigger than who I normally would want to eat with—people who look like me and act like me and think like me.

It got him killed.

This reality of Jesus' life was captured by his own words in this Gospel story: “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you.”

Jesus insisted on his strange habit of eating with anyone and everyone: Religious leaders? Sure I'd love to come over. Prostitute or tax collector? How about next Thursday? Fisherman or Businessman? Can't wait. Heretic? Tonight at 7. Atheist? For sure! Enemy? What are you doing right now?

What do we take from this stubborn decision to make the authorities angry at him by eating with them and with the people they hated? What do we do with this? How does it affect our own eating habits? Who do I eat with? Maybe, more importantly, with whom do I not eat? Because remember, if I won't eat with you, then I am basically saying that we don't share a world. We have nothing in common. We are just too different.

But in the end, this isn't about eating. It is about love—a radically inclusive love. Who do we keep out and who do we let in? If we say we love this Jesus and are followers

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of this Jesus, then we cannot dismiss this fact of his life too readily and too glibly. His love is all embracing.

I have to allow that fact to have a bearing on my love for others—those different than I. Jesus can associate all he wants with those kinds of people, but my following of Jesus will stop short of that. We cannot keep writing this stuff off! How many of us never make it a point to get to know and hang out with people different than ourselves? Poorer or wealthier people than I? Smarter or dumber? People of color or not? Same orientation or different? Different politics? People who are not so interesting?

What I know now is that Jesus made it one of the defining points of his ministry to choose to eat with everybody, no matter what—to love inclusively no matter what. So it's a fair question to ask myself, and you, that if we are Jesus' followers, how are we imitating that behavior on which Jesus staked his life—choices Jesus made that scripture scholars say “got him killed?”

What drove Jesus' choices? His belief that we are one people in one world, and we have more in common than is apparent sometimes. None of us is better or worse than any others. Both Sirach and Luke today are clarions calling us to humility. Perhaps it is a mark of true humility to admit I can live with, learn from and enjoy those who look different than I; and act differently than I, and think different than I. And it takes an even deeper humility to act on that.

It got him killed. As someone who really wants to live his Way I have to ask myself, is there anything radically inclusive about my loving?

Maybe next time I have a break at work, I could choose to have a meal or spend some time with someone a little less important to me, or someone who is very different than I.

I promise, it won't kill you.

* Recommended reading for further development of these insipient thoughts can be found in almost any book by John Dominic Crossan or Marcus Borg or Fr. John Meier.