

Ephesians 2: 12-14, 17-22

Luke 5: 27-32

*Life doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints.
It takes and it takes and it takes (and we keep living anyway).
We rise (and we fall),
We fall (and we break),
(And we make our mistakes)¹*

...perhaps these words sound familiar to you, they're sung by the character, Aaron Burr, in the hit musical, *Hamilton*. They echo the pain and hurt of someone watching others zoom past him, doing the things he wants to do, having the things he wants to have, living the life he wishes were his own.

It's one of my favorite songs in the musical because it speaks so candidly about the complexity of life and the human experience. Burr, like all of us, wasn't a downright evil person or a villain, but an actual human being with complex thoughts and emotions—and rollercoaster experiences. At times in his life, Burr was both a sinner and saint.

In our Gospel passage, we encounter Jesus calling a man named Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. We see Jesus join Levi and his friends for a dinner party, and then follow the pushback as the Pharisees and their scribes complain to the disciples that Jesus is eating with sinners and tax collectors.

You see, tax collectors were despised by all people who were subject to Roman rule, particularly Jews. Tax collectors didn't just collect the taxes that were due, they went beyond – some even call it betrayal – they took more than what was expected order to make a profit. They had to take more than what was required by Roman Law, away from their neighbors and peers.²

It isn't hard to see why they weren't liked.

¹ Miranda, Lin-Manuel, 1980-, Alex, Lacamoire and Ron Chernow, *Hamilton: An American Musical*, 2016. (Warner/Chappell, Los Angeles, CA).

² Indebted to the work of Dr. Justo Gonzalez in his *The Story Luke Tells*.

For Jews, this feeling was even more acute. Tax collectors had to deal with Gentiles and so, they worked with people considered unclean—and any Jews thought to do anything with tax collectors were considered sinners.

When Levi invites Jesus to come dine with him and his friends, he’s inviting him to come dine with people who are despised and thought unclean, and the Pharisees aren’t having any of it. Perhaps it’s because it’s easier to cast stones, calling those people sinners, than to look in the mirror.

Now, we don’t like to talk about sin, especially our own. We think of sin as doing bad things, or breaking the “rules.” But the biblical understanding of sin goes beyond that.

In the Bible, sin is translated from the Hebrew word, *Khata*, which means to fail or miss the goal. When the Israelite tribe of Benjamin trained a small army of slingshot experts, they could hit someone in the head and not *Khata* – or not miss. In other words, sin is a failure to miss or fulfill a goal. And we learn early on in the biblical vision, that every human being is created in the image of God, a sacred being who represents the creator and is worthy of respect.³

In this way of seeing the world, sin is then a failure to love God, others, and all of creation by not treating them with the honor they deserve. The other side of sin in the Bible is that when people sin, they either don’t know it, or they think that what they’re doing is a good thing – because we get so caught up in “justifying it” to ourselves.

I can only speak for myself, but I know I’ve ‘Khata’d’ a lot in my life. I “miss the mark” in treating others with the respect they deserve: when I was a kid and was mean to my younger cousin, taking his crayons or his matchbox cars, or when frustrated as I drove on 23 running late to a meeting, stuck behind a slow-driver sitting in the left lane – mumbling some not nice things, or when I fail to do my part to create less waste in the world, or when I’m annoyed by a quip my spouse spoke to me, as I failed to do the thing I said I was going to do, and I “miss the mark” in how I show up.

When we *Khata*, or sin, we build walls between us and God, between us and one another, and between us and all of creation. And we’re kind of good at building walls because we’re all sinners and saints.

*We rise (and we fall),
We fall (and we break),
(And we make our mistakes)*

And we miss the mark.

But the good news is that all of you, each and every person here in this room or joining us virtually, wherever you are, you are also a saint, *called*, just like Levi, to follow Jesus and show up differently in the world, breaking bread and sharing life with sinners and tax collectors alike.

³ This example comes from the work of *The Bible Project*. They offer great resources on biblical words, concepts and stories. I use their work in our confirmation classes! You can find their videos on YouTube.

When the religious leaders critique Jesus for doing this very thing, he answered:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”⁴

Jesus came for those who *know* they need help. His life and ministry are filled with movements, not towards those who are perfect and have it all together, but towards those who are broken and hurting. That’s what this place is supposed to be like. That’s what this house of worship and prayer should be. Not a place for those who have it all together. Not a place for *the leaders and best*. But a place for the broken and hurting, the hungry and thirsty, the doubting and wandering. A few years back, Pope Francis shared in an interview the role he thought the church must find itself in our current time. This interview was in 2013, but I think it speaks prophetically, even to this particular moment in 2021 about our calling, as a church.

“I see clearly, [he said,] that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds! Heal the wounds.”⁵

Growing up, I lived right down the street from my Grandma Liva’s house. It was great. I could walk or ride my bike over whenever I wanted. I’ve always been kind of chubby, but in the summer between my 7th-8th grade I gained a few extra pounds. Everyday I’d go over to my grandma’s house to eat some food; sometimes it was breakfast, sometimes it was lunch, sometimes it was both, sometimes I was just there all day. Most of the time my grandma had something cooking already and you could smell it down the block: molé, bistec en salsa verde, carne frita, arroz con gandules. But I usually ate the same thing – I was a picky eater – tacos of beans with chorizo and bacon. *Yeah, I know, not the healthiest.* It was pretty great though.

⁴ Luke 5: 31-32, *NRSV*.

⁵ Francis, *A Big Heart Open to God*, <http://americanmagazine.org/pope-interview>

I remember two things about eating at her house each day. First, there was always food. Second, no matter who walked in the door, she would tell you to sit down, she'd plopped down a plate in front of you, and when you'd finish she'd try and give you another one. And it wasn't just family who came over, my aunts and uncles and cousins would bring friends, and colleagues, whoever was with them—it didn't matter who you were—if you were hungry you had a seat at her table, there was food, there was conversation, all centered around her full table.

Like my grandma's table, we're a people who gather around this table.

A table where the first shall be last, and the last will be first.

A table where those who are greatest among you will be your servants.

A table where all who exult themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

A table, not to reward good behavior,

But a table for the sick, and welcome to the wanderer.

A table for sinners and saints alike.

I think there is another image we can take with us from this story.

In Judaism, there really isn't a word for repent or repentance, but the Hebrew word *teshuva* is often translated that way. *Te shuv* means to turn—to turn away from the ways we *khata* – but also to return to that goodness within us. As human beings created in the image of God, goodness and Godliness are within us from the very beginning, and that cannot be destroyed.

As sinners and saints, all of us, we all stand like Levi with Jesus calling out to us—follow me. And with this invitation comes the *calling*, not only to return to the divine image within each of us, but just as we do when we come to this table and return to our seats on communion Sunday. This *calling* moves us to turn towards each other, breaking bread together, sharing life together, honoring the dignity and godliness within one another, healing our wounds together, making sure there's room for whomever might walk through the door. And when we do that, we extend this table of grace, wherever we go, tearing down the walls that divide us. May it be so.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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