

John Sampson  
"Eating with Collaborators"  
Text: Matthew 21:23 - 32  
Preached at KVCC  
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

A couple of weeks ago we heard Jesus invite us to engage with our brothers, and sisters, when they hurt us, and not to simply break with them. And after a period of engagement and witness, if they still don't change, then he says we can treat them like...tax collectors...or Gentiles.

And we laughed a little because one of our very own members is a tax collector.

Well this Sunday the tax collectors are back, but this time they're paired with prostitutes! And this time Jesus gives them a bit of a backhanded compliment. He says that even tax collectors...and prostitutes...can ultimately get the message of the kingdom that Jesus has been preaching...even these people, even the worst of the worst, can get the message...so why can't the seemingly upright and pious get it?

If I were a tax collector I might think, "Wow, thanks Jesus! Thanks a lot."

But after thinking about the previous reading and today's story, it occurred to me that it might not be completely obvious to us why tax collectors always get such a bad wrap in the Gospels.

So there's the obvious. Nobody likes to pay taxes, and tax collectors are people who enforce the law. In Jesus' time tax collectors also

took their role a step further and often made people pay more than the Empire demanded and then skimmed the excess for their own use. This is one of the big complaints that weaves through the stories of Jesus' ministry.

But tax collectors were also what we would today call collaborators. They were Jews who worked with the Roman Imperial state in support of the system of domination and subjugation that their people had to endure. Tax collectors were seen as traitors to their own people, and men, for they were always men, who enabled the Romans to enact their Empire over the Jews who wanted nothing more than their own sovereign kingdom.

Think about Hitler. Hitler was deranged, but he couldn't have achieved the destruction of the Jews, and the gypsies, and gays if others didn't help him. Anne Frank wasn't taken from her hiding place and murdered by Hitler himself. She was exterminated

because someone in her town – someone who was a collaborator with the Nazis – turned her in.

And in first century Palestine tax collectors were seen as this same kind of person.

But the tax collectors aren't the only collaborators in the story we hear this morning. So are some of the "chief priests and the elders of the people." This is the charge that the common Jewish people often leveled against their elites. Although the religious and civil rulers of Jerusalem and Judea doubtless wanted the Romans to leave the Jewish homeland, they none-the-less worked with the occupying forces of Rome. They were in a desperate relationship with their conquerors in which they worked for the Romans, supported their presence in the land, and used the Empire for their own ends. In their own way, many of the priests and elders were collaborators.

I think we'd like to look at our story and believe that at least Jesus remains pure and untouched by his life within the Empire. But I think that's too simple a view. There was a group of Jews called the Essenes who lived around the time of Jesus, and they thought the religious and political system of Judea under Roman rule was so corrupt and irredeemable that they left their homes and moved out to the desert to form their own religious community. Peace out Jerusalem! They wanted to have nothing to do with the world they saw around them. It's this group of people who have given us the Dead Sea scrolls.

But Jesus wasn't one of the Essenes. Although Jesus preached and taught about how the world was so lost that it should be destroyed in fire and remade from the ground up, he said that this would happen at the end of time. Before then he stayed within the world, and taught within its rules and regulations, even as he critiqued them and gave us a vision that surpassed their limitations. Jesus

worked from inside the system. In a fundamental way Jesus collaborated with a structure he so despised.

What today's reading gives us is a vision of the world that is almost claustrophobic in its corruption. There is no group, or people, or teacher who is fully pure, who doesn't partake in the brokenness of humanity, and the failings of community. No one's hands in this world, according to the vision of Matthew, are clean.

And it is with these dirty hands, hands that can never be truly clean, that we come to eat at this table. For we too are all collaborators who support and benefit from, in our own individual ways, a world that isn't just, and isn't fair, and isn't inline with the vision God has for her children.

But we're still invited to this table. Just because our hands are dirty, doesn't mean that God doesn't want us to come to her feast. But

look up and see who is seated around the table with you. We are all collaborators – you and me – all of us. Even the host of this table – Jesus himself – Jesus touched so profoundly by God’s hope for humanity – works in collusion with all of the limitations and failings of what it means to be human.

It may seem like I’m a Debbie Downer this morning, that I’ve thrown cold water on a perfectly beautiful Sunday morning with a dismal view of humanity. But I think within this vision that Matthew shares with us is a great truth. It is this. We may all be broken, all of our hands may be dirty in one-way or another, but even so we are invited into the community of God, and one another. It is our birthright as citizens of God’s realm.

So come, all of you who are tax collectors, all of you who are priests, all of you who are the elite, all of you who are prostitutes, all of you who are great teachers. Come and eat all of you who collaborate

with a world that never seems to live up to its promise. Come, for  
the host of this table invites us all.

AMEN.