

A WORD FROM THE DEAN

Discipleship in COMMUNITY

The word “disciple” has a little background worth noting. It is translated from the Greek *mathētēs* (μαθητής), via the Latin *discipulus*, meaning a learner or an apprentice. It is used in the New Testament as a designation for those who accept a given doctrine or follow a certain teacher. Thus, we read of how Jesus chose his disciples and how he was frequently about with them (e.g., Matt 5:1; Mark 2:15; Luke 6:1; John 2:2, 7:3). We also read of John the Baptist whose disciples left him to join Jesus (John 1:35–37) and of the Pharisees with their tradition-observant disciples (Mark 2:18).

From the gospels, we gather that it is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. (Consider, for example, the words of Jesus in Luke 14:27 and 14:33). One is expected not only to learn but to put what one has learned into practice. As someone puts it, “Disciples hear, learn and do.”

All this is familiar enough. What is usually overlooked is the place of community. While not discounting the influence of significant others on an individual's spiritual development or the efficacy of one-on-one interaction, we believe discipleship is best fostered in a

community. Jesus demonstrated the value of grouping His disciples together for teaching, prayer, and interaction. He was known to devote generous time with the Twelve, as well as with His wider circle of disciples numbering some 70 (Luke 10:1).

At Discipleship Training Centre, we remain committed to the small-group approach to theological training, with students and staff living and working in community. Pray for us and, as the Lord leads, support us financially



Dr Lim K Tham
Dean

*For to us
a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)*

The DTC family wishes you and your loved ones
a Blessed and Joyous Advent season!

Eating with Jesus:

Some reflections on the Kingdom of God in Luke's gospel

Dr Eileen Poh

One activity which most of us missed during lockdown was eating together with friends and family not living in our household. That is not surprising because eating together is such a basic human activity. Is there more to it than just putting food into our mouths in the company of family and friends?

I would like to share three occasions in Luke's Gospel when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, and Pharisees. In the ancient world, eating together was an expression of friendship, harmony, and intimacy. One usually ate with people from the same religious, social and economic classes. So when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, he deliberately broke many of these social conventions.

Dining with Tax Collectors and Sinners

In Luke 5:27–32, Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. Levi obeys immediately, and throws a great party, inviting Jesus and his tax collector friends and others. This draws criticism from the Pharisees: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" In Jesus' day, tax collectors were hated because they collected taxes for the Romans. They usually collected more than the required amount and pocketed the rest. Sinners were those who, according to the Pharisees, had broken God's laws. The Pharisees considered them ritually impure, and would never eat with them, for this would contaminate them. They expect Jesus to keep away from tax collectors and sinners. Instead, He is enjoying his meal with them.

Jesus uses this meal setting to speak of his mission: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:31). Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners into the kingdom of God. The Pharisees had excluded these people. Not only did Jesus teach that the kingdom of God is inclusive, but He also sat and ate with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees criticised him, calling him "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34).

Eating with Pharisees

Next, we look at Jesus eating with Pharisees. In Luke 7:36–50, Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus and other guests to dinner. When they are reclining at the table, a woman "who has lived a sinful life" (7:37) gate-crashes their party! This unnamed woman stands behind Jesus and weeps quietly. Her tears fall on Jesus' feet. She then kneels, wipes those tears with her hair, kisses his feet and pours perfume on them.

Simon the Pharisee is outraged but remains silent. Surely Jesus knows she is a sinner; he should reject her immediately. Having her there is like eating with someone infected with the Covid-19 virus with no social distancing. Extremely contagious!

Then Jesus turns to Simon and tells him a story: Two men owe money to a certain moneylender. One owes him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Both could not pay back, so he cancels their debts. "Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replies, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled."

Jesus points out that the sinner woman, by her extravagant acts, has shown her love for Jesus, for she knows she has been forgiven much. Jesus uses this meal setting to teach about forgiveness. The kingdom of God



Eileen (from Singapore) and her husband Philip (UK), both standing, enjoying a meal in 2011/2012 with then DTC students (from left) Annalisa (Singapore), Ryoko (Japan), Paula (Thailand) and Sothea (Cambodia). Photo: Look Tuck Weng

welcomes a sinner woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace,” Jesus says to her. Here we see Jesus crossing ritual, social, and gender boundaries.

Another occasion when Jesus dined with the Pharisees is in Luke 14:1–14. Jesus’ host is a prominent Pharisee. He observes the guests picking the places of honour at the table. In the ancient world, a person’s status could be seen by the place he occupied at the table. Jesus takes this opportunity to teach about humility. When you are invited, Jesus says, take the lowest place, so that your host will come and ask you to move to the place of honour. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus also teaches about the kingdom of God. He tells them a parable (14:15–24). A certain man prepares a great banquet, and he invites many guests. But those who are invited make excuses and refuse to attend. So the man sends his servant to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

This is a picture of the great Messianic banquet that will take place in the future. Those who think they are in may find themselves turned away. But those who accept Jesus’ invitation will be found in the kingdom of God—the tax collectors and sinners, the prostitute, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, and with Pharisees. He used these occasions to teach about his mission and demonstrate the presence of the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom is open to all who respond to his call and repent.

When We Eat Together

Who are the “tax collectors and sinners” and “the Pharisees” in our society today? Would we eat with them? Some years ago, I was involved in the ministry of a Christian half-way

house for women drug addicts. I recall my awkwardness when I sat and ate with the residents. Jesus would have felt at home with them. I must learn again that the kingdom of God is inclusive, and Jesus cares about humility and forgiveness of sin. Jesus loves these women drug addicts whom society has shunned. One day I will sit with them at that great Messianic banquet which our Lord Jesus will preside. But first I must learn to love them, and eat with them here.

When Christians eat together, it demonstrates the presence and reality of the kingdom of God in our midst. God’s kingdom transcends national boundaries. At DTC, we come from different nations, different cultures, and we speak different languages. Whenever we eat together at DTC, we are demonstrating the reality and presence of the kingdom of God in our midst. We are those who have received the forgiveness of God.

But there were times when I had noticed that students in DTC who had issues with one another made it a point not to sit at the same table for the meal. I have to confess that I had done the same myself. When we do that, what does that say about our understanding of God’s kingdom, his love and forgiveness, and about our need to be humble? Perhaps the meal table is a first step towards reconciliation. We can sit next to the one who has offended us or hurt us, take the opportunity to serve him or her.

We have received the forgiveness of God, and Jesus teaches us to be humble and forgive others. Are there people who have hurt you whom you find difficult to forgive? Perhaps the meal table can be a first step toward reconciliation. You can sit and eat with them, and talk about your differences. Our eating together will demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God in our midst, and a foretaste of that great messianic banquet we will enjoy with Jesus in the future.

FROM OUR ALUMNI

CARING TEACHERS, LEARNING COMMUNITY

DTC alumna Manuni Lalnuntluangi (1998–2000) is based in Shillong, North-East India. She is teaching with her husband Micky at Nichols-Roy Bible College and also a PhD candidate at Martin Luther Christian University. This is an edited version of her sharing during DTC chapel through Zoom.

Allow me to share with you some things that I hold dear about DTC and values that I desire to impart to others in my ministry.

TEACHERS’ CARE FOR STUDENTS

I learnt great lessons from the relationship between teachers and students—great examples from our pastoral group mentors, if I remember correctly, Wee Seng and Cheng in my first year, and Warren and Stroma in my second year. Though teachers, the way they related with us made us so at ease. Their deep love for us was memorable.

As an Indian student, I could not go home during our short holidays. I was invited by Eileen to stay with them and my first-ever visit to McDonald’s happened when she took me there for breakfast. I also stayed with Jenny Ong, our then Admin staff. Apart from our mentors, other staff like Patsy Kee and Joshua took us to their homes or shops for food. I cannot forget the care I received from Dr David Harley and Rosemary. Dr Harley was instrumental in our MTh studies at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), Bangalore. Even as I am involved in a cross-cultural teaching ministry, I try to care for our students the way I got care from my DTC teachers.

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LEARNING TO LIVE WITH OTHER CULTURES

I thought sweeping the room nicely when your roommate was asleep, keeping the room clean and not to let others see your act of service was a good gesture. I got a nice scolding from my roommate, who was my senior, for not thinking for her when she was sleeping. I learnt that we think differently in each culture. I also learnt that it is important to communicate clearly to avoid unnecessary tensions and to solve our problems quickly.

KNOWING MYSELF BETTER

I was asked about my Mizo culture a number of times, like what food we eat back home, our dress and the important things in our culture. This made me aware of where I came from and our culture. I learnt that to know myself was so important even for my spiritual and ministerial life.

GROWING THROUGH LECTURES

Our class composition was one of a kind. In our first year, our classmates' children ran around in the class. We had the late Dr Tan, a retired medical pensioner, and some of us in our early 20s. Class lectures, discussions and questions sharpened our minds to grow. DTC introduced me to the importance of theological studies and put in me the hunger to go higher in theological education.

I presented on national security in Christian Ethics class one day. Eileen asked me, "Will Peter Parwez, our senior student from Pakistan, accept what you said?" I was blaming Pakistan a bit. Our teachers helped me to see things from a balanced perspective and made me realize that my thinking was not always the only right one.

PRACTICAL MINISTRY

I thank DTC, especially Loren Fox, our practical ministry-in-charge, for arranging ministry engagements. I was placed with OMF in Cambodia and Indonesia during our December holidays. Those experiences helped me a lot post-DTC as I continued to be involved and live in a cross-cultural set-

up. I was fortunate to stay with Alice Compain, the veteran OMF missionary to Cambodia, and follow her in ministry. Observing her itself was priceless.

My weekly ministry was with Barker Road Methodist Church (BRMC) in my first year and Varsity Christian Fellowship (VCF) in National University of Singapore in my second year. Can you believe that I am still in touch with our VCF Cell Group leader, Grace Tan? I did not get the opportunity to thank BRMC in person for sponsoring my Masters of Christian Ministry. What they have invested 20 years ago has been bearing fruits for the extension of God's kingdom in India.

PLUCKING MANGOES

My DTC memories will not be complete if I do not share one funny incident. Remember the mango tree near the main gate? My Thai friend and I plucked the fruit when we saw it ripen and two of us enjoyed it nicely. That evening, our Dean's wife, Mrs Phyllis Warner, announced that no one should pluck anything from any tree and that all the fruit harvests are for sharing in the community, not for individual consumption. My friend and I felt so ashamed and even cried. At night, someone kept mangoes in my pigeon hole. They felt sad for us. We learnt from that mistake.



Manuni (3rd from right) with her students. Photo: Manuni Lalnuntluangi

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