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Jesus' Table Fellowship as a Model for Therapy

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The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say,
“Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’”

Matthew 11:19a

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of Jesus' ministries involves his actions at the meal table, in which he was openly criticized for fellowshiping with sinners. It is my argument that this very act of inclusiveness, as well as the healing that Christ offered by his presence, which we as therapists should strive for within our own practice. Christ offers a model of how to create a hospitable environment in which the wounded can come with the confidence that they will receive acceptance and help with their bandages. In order to better understand this model that I believe Christ has enacted for us, this essay will first briefly cover the importance of meals in the first century Palestinian context, as well as what Christ indeed demonstrated through his inclusive fellowship. I will then conclude by further demonstrating the implications of Jesus' example on the therapy room and our obligation as Christian therapists to attempt to create the same hospitable space that Christ did.

Importance of meals

In first century Judaism, meals were one of the most significant social functions (Osiek & Balch, 1997:45). According to Neyrey (1991), “Meals...are a potential source of information about a group's symbolic universe”(p.363). Meals were typically restricted in two ways: social status and the difference between clean and unclean food. Therefore, according to Achtemeier, Green, and Meye Thompson (2001), meals established boundaries and were opportunities to display one's level of honor in the

society. With whom one ate and what one ate were highly emphasized by the religious elite, such as the Pharisees. This emphasis can be seen in the gospels by how the Pharisees are presented as concerned and even outraged by Jesus' table behavior. In the Pharisaic interpretation of the law, such fellowship with "unclean" persons was a strict offense to the purity of Yahweh. Moreover, the self-identity of the Jewish nation as the people of God incorporated key practices, of which are table companions and food laws. For example, in the Old Testament account of Daniel, the writer states how through maintaining the Jewish dietary regulations, Daniel was able to sustain his Jewish identity (Achteimeier, Green, & Meye Thompson, 2001).

What Jesus taught through his table fellowship

Achteimeier, Green, and Meye Thompson (2001) compare Jesus' table fellowship to his miracles of healing and exorcism in that both of these actions demonstrate the "inbreaking of the kingdom of God" (p.151). Through his table fellowship, Jesus exhibits a future reality that impacts one's practices today. Jesus is said to foster *liminality*, defined by Brawley (1995) as "the state between separation from social structure and reaggregation back into social structure. It breaks down social distinctions and stresses equality and camaraderie, and it leads...an undifferentiated whole over against the segmentation of social structure" (p.28). In other words, Christ joins with those who have been ostracized and invites them back into a place in society by joining them in a meal.

Unlike other teachers and noble men of his day, Jesus' does not carefully choose his table companions in order to better his own social status or demonstrate his high standing to society. Instead, he eats with toll collectors and sinners, who would have

been considered as beneath his social status (Luke 15:1-2). He blatantly disregards the wider society on a whole, as well as the Jewish society in particular (with especial emphasis to the rejection of the Pharisee's teaching), by eating with such individuals. Smith (1994) states that in this way, Jesus embodies the future kingdom of God in the present day, offering healing and salvation through his table manners. Not only did his actions demonstrate Jesus' perspective on who is and is not welcome into the kingdom of God as a future goal to be achieved in the next world, but his table fellowship also spoke to the injustice of this world, calling for a reorientation of actions including the welcoming of sinners back into human community. This must have been devastatingly insulting to the Pharisees for Jesus to demonstrate that these "wrong" people will participate in the kingdom of God and should be welcomed in daily activities on this earth, not necessarily those who carefully practice dietary regulations.

Sanders (1985) understands Jesus' welcoming of these impure individuals as even more scandalous by defining such persons as "wicked", as would have most likely been thought by the Pharisees. Therefore, Christ not only welcomes the wicked into his kingdom, he does so without first requiring repentance or penitence, which is contrary to Jewish tradition. By eating with these "sinners," Jesus is symbolically expressing the forgiveness of sins, which offers the chance of a new beginning via the context of fellowship (Blomberg, 2005). As a result of Jesus' inclusive table fellowship, Jesus is identified with the socially marginalized, challenges established social boundaries, and faces much animosity.

Table fellowship in the therapy room

It is quite easy to see why Jesus' inclusive table fellowship stood as a stark contrast to the actions others in that society. However, the question remains on how Jesus' actions can be a direct model for us as Christian therapists.

One of the first ways Jesus' model affects us as therapists is how Jesus welcomed the hurting, the rejected, and the "wicked" of society to commune with him. As therapists, we will be in the presence of deeply wounded individuals and families. We have the choice to treat such persons with dignity and respect as Christ did, or join society in judging them and separating them from the "normal" society. Moreover, we can choose to side with these broken persons and shun society's expectations and judgments. Perhaps the entity that will be most prone to clash with in our inclusive therapy is the religious society, as Christ himself experienced. We will be bombarded with stereotypical answers such as, "God hates _____," "Perhaps they just need to spend more time with God about this," and, "When you work with such individuals, you are condoning their behavior." In my reading of the scriptures, Christ was not preoccupied whether his healing presence to such hurting people was condoning or not. He did not require "purity" before entering into relationship with "sinners." So too do we have a privileged position to join with those persons who the world/religious entities have rejected and judged and uphold them with love.

In Nouwen's (1979) short work entitled, *The Wounded Healer*, he encourages ministers (and I would add therapists to this) to recognize the sufferings in their own hearts and make this recognition the starting point of their ministry. Christ himself was a wounded healer, rejected by his own people. Yet in his injury, he welcomed others to

come and sit with him. He did not concentrate on his own rejection, but focused on the hurt of others in order to offer healing from cruel situations that life has to offer, including ones' own decisions. This directly corresponds to Nouwen's philosophy on hospitality, which he states is the discipline of concentrating on the other person and withdrawing oneself from the room. This is simply to say that Christ made room for these individuals, when the larger society wanted nothing to do with them. Therapists must make room for these hurting individuals and must not reject them with words of false encouragement or subtle judgment. Instead, as Jesus demonstrates in his table fellowship, we must be bold enough to join them on an equal setting and sit with them in the middle of their pain.

Another way in which Christ's table fellowship informs our therapy is the manner in which Christ humbled himself to participate in the company of the wicked. After completing a degree from a well-respected institution, it may be quite easy for us to adopt an attitude of pride. Undoubtedly, it will be quite easy to think that we are somehow better persons for not making such poor decisions or not experiencing such horrible situations as our clients. Perhaps we will even imagine how if we were in our client's positions, we would conduct ourselves in such a more dignified manner. After all, we do know what is best (or so we may think!). However, when I examine the example of Jesus, the very creator of this world, who truly does know what is best in every circumstance, he does not present himself to these ostracized persons as better than them. He is not concerned in sharing his profound wisdom with everyone he meets. Instead, I see him as more concerned with offering a place of safety and acceptance.

By creating this space, Christ offers forgiveness and the chance of a new beginning via relationship with him. We too, should strive to offer clients the hope of a new beginning, a new perspective, or simply a new way of handling an old situation. This hope must grow from our relationship with the clients based on what Rogers would state is “unconditional positive regard.” That is, judgment, condemnation, and arrogance must be stricken from the relationship and hope and empowerment for change must be cultivated.

Conclusion

Jesus offers a model for therapists in his table fellowship by welcoming the outcasts of society to dwell in the holy presence of a wounded healer. So shall we follow this model that Christ has demonstrated and create a hospitable safe place for the hurting of this world. We shall create a place in which we can offer healing not necessarily out of our expertise, but rather from our humility in joining with the rejected of society and sitting with them in their pain. If we are to do this, the world will surely notice, just as it stood amazed at Jesus' inclusive table fellowship. While some may be indignant, those who we invite to “eat with us” will experience healing and the eschatological hope of a future of caring and hospitality for all people.

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