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Dinner with Sinners

By Dodd Sims, M. D.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Luke 5:30

My favorite cousin is a Baptist pastor – at least he was a pastor. He left the ministry to work in the tech industry, but he's still Southern Baptist to the core. Solid, church-going folk. He and his wife teach Sunday school for adults every week in northern Alabama. I find their house easily – head down the main drag, turn right at Chick-fil-A.

Huntsville is reputed to be the most liberal town in the state, but it feels very traditional when we pass through. At dinner in a restaurant, I order a beer with my shrimp and grits, and then immediately regret it. I feel like a sinner. I know I shouldn't, but I do. Nobody cares that I ordered a beer. No one is judging me. But still?

I remind myself, Jesus ate with sinners, didn't he? That's why Jesus came to us, isn't it? To break bread, even with sinners. There is something about being immersed in a church-going culture, where friends and families actually say grace together, even in restaurants, even in Chick-fil-A. It's different, but I like the feeling, this feeling of the tables being turned. My ideas, my views, my customs aren't the only ones. It's good to recognize that.

I learn new things, the fine points of evangelical theology; we talk about penal substitution and imputed righteousness. It's clear that doctrines are real for my cousin and his wife. For example, complementarianism – a theological view held by some that men and women have separate, “complementary” roles that preclude women from specific functions of ministry. This means you won't find women pastors in most Southern Baptist churches.

Last year, *The Guardian*, a leading newspaper for the “educated classes” in Britain, started something like a dating service. Called “Dining Across the Divide,” it matches individuals who are separated by cultural and political issues. Readers take a survey, answering questions like “Was Brexit a good thing?” or “Should we abolish the monarchy?” Unlike a traditional dating service, where the goal is to match you with a compatible soul mate, *The Guardian* tries to match you with someone quite incompatible. You go to dinner, you discuss the issues of the day, and you submit to a short interview. The most interesting interviews are published each week.

I've become fascinated by these reports. Most “couples” hit it off. In fact, many have already planned a second date. They almost all confess that their dining partner was surprisingly decent, that they really learned something new. In some cases, they came away changed. Lights flash, doors open. Metaphors abound. Clearly, something is happening.

Braver Angels, a New York-based nonprofit, is an American movement with similar goals. Here the encounters across the divide are structured as small group meetings at the community level. A local leader puts together a group with equal numbers of “blues” and “reds.” A facilitator helps to launch them into respectful dialogue and then stands back, letting the group dynamic carry the process forward.

On a more personal level, I try to get myself invited to mosque, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, and not just to observe. I get down on my knees and join in the prayers. The buttoned-down white guy in khakis, I feel odd at first. But after a while, I start to sense the spirit, to catch the cadence of the prayers and the highly-structured movements of the congregation – they kneel, they rise, they kneel again.

In this country, especially during the major holidays when families get together, there is always practical advice for avoiding conflict around the dinner table. No religion. No politics. Talk about sports. Reminisce about family members long gone. Just smile when your brother-in-law launches into an outburst about climate change or corporate greed, about election fraud or immigration.

It's all practical advice. Yet at the end of the day, the only way forward is the route Jesus took. These are opportunities to seize – not uncomfortable situations to avoid. We must break bread together.

So, it doesn't matter how you do it, just get out there. For Pete's sake, invite someone you might not see eye to eye with to Chick-fil-A. The spicy chicken sandwich is spicy; the sweet tea is sweet. Get a new view at dinner. It's good for your soul.