

Some Words About...

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Sunanakeimai (dinner guest)

The Greek word *anakeimai* simply means one who is eating, but *sunanakeimai* means a dinner guest, one who has been invited to a special occasion.

Before New Testament

In 3 Maccabees, King Ptolemy IV had arranged a banquet for his friends and gave orders for Jews to be trampled by elephants in the hippodrome. It was the third time he gave and rescinded the same order. But his relatives “who were his dinner guests” wondered at his repeated change of mind.

New Testament Use

Matthew 9:10 (//Mark 2:15) says that as Jesus “dined in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came as dinner guests with him and his disciples.” (Mark tells us that the house was that of Levi, one of Jesus’ disciples.) The sinners were not merely eating with Jesus, they were invited guests at the house of one of Jesus’ closest followers. This was socially and, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, religiously unacceptable.

In Matthew 14:9 King Herod, because of his oath and “those who were his dinner guests,” agreed to give the head of John the Baptist to Salome. A desire to please one’s dinner guests is assumed or they would not have been invited in the first place, but here it reaches monstrous proportions.

Luke 7:49 tells of an incident when Jesus was eating with Simon the Pharisee. A woman, who was a known sinner, came in and anointed Jesus’ feet and kissed his feet. Simon’s guests watched, and they listened as Jesus talked with Simon. But they were not prepared to hear Jesus tell the woman that her sins were forgiven. “And the dinner guests said among themselves, ‘Who is he that he even forgives sins?’” The contrast here is between faith and love on the one hand and the egocentric mores of the diners on the other. Then (as now) the comfortable judgment of a group devoted to following a human pattern of assumed superiority — whether supporting or opposing the status quo — determines most accolades and condemnations. The mores of society and the dictates of the religious institutions made it impossible for the woman ever to cast off her reputation or be forgiven her sins. But God’s forgiveness does not correspond to human judgments. The particularity of God’s dealing with each person as an individual rather than as an instance of a type is part of what makes God incomprehensible. And it is what makes faith rather than enthusiasm the necessary response to God.

Luke 14:1-24 has Jesus again dining at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. The conversation centers on dining, and “one of the dinner guests hearing this said, ‘The blessed shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.’” This pious interjection gave Jesus an opportunity to instruct the man about the possible nature of the heavenly dinner guests.

Today

Most of our social activities involve setting one group against another — generally for sport or other competition — but eating together and working together suggest a commonality unless other elements are introduced. When Jesus says to invite outsiders to your feasts, and when he says that the king (God) tells his servants to round up outsiders to his feast, he is implying an unrestricted acceptability in the kingdom of God.

All kinds of people are invited to attend our churches, but not all kinds respond. Partly this is because some feel they would not be welcomed. Probably the best way around this is for members to meet and invite outsiders personally so they are not faced with confronting a mass of strangers. To know some member of a group before

facing the group as a whole is reassuring. When going into the streets and lanes of the city to compel them to be God's dinner guests, one should be kind and friendly — in other words, Christian.

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