

HOW JESUS LIVED OUT HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

John Dominic Crossan is a theologian best known for his writings about the Parables of Jesus. He is also one of the founders of the “Jesus Sayings” group: theologians who met regularly to discuss – and vote on – whether particular passages in the Gospels were or were not the actual sayings of Jesus.

But Crossan also has a special theme running through many of his books, namely, what is the heart of Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of heaven? Over time Crossan boiled it down to a single practice of Jesus: eating together with anyone and everyone he met. It seems like such a simple thing, but, in reality, it isn’t – not in the Jewish society of his day, and not in our own society.

Jesus was heavily criticized by the Pharisees for “dining with sinners.” He told Zacheus, the despised tax collector, “I wish to dine with you today.” He allowed Mary to enter the house where he was dining so she could anoint his feet with oil. He ate with the disciples regularly and cured Peter’s mother-in-law at the end of one dinner. In brief, his table – and his company – was open to all comers, rich and poor, high and low, gentile and Jew.

In many ways, Jesus’ practice is embodied in the current church song “All are welcome.” The verses spell out the particular groups and types of persons who are, indeed, welcomed: “Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. . . Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true, where all God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s reign anew.”

Can we – do we – embody this practice of Jesus in our daily lives? With neighbors, and those we work with; with people we encounter when we are travelling, and when we give parties for special occasions? Do we embrace those from different races, from differing religious and economic backgrounds; and, indeed, do we broaden our reach out across political lines so that we can open our hearts and our minds to “Them,” the other, those we deny and demean?

Holiness does not consist in any practice but in a disposition of heart. . . trusting to audacity in God’s unconditional love. Only that can bring us into full emotional or spiritual maturity. Centering prayer emphasizes assent to the presence of God. Its goal is a personal relationship with God whose love is constant. The changes we are seeking in our lives and our world begin within the sacred plane of transformation in where you are. Abbot Thomas Keating.