

I had him pegged. I remember well confidently assuring my Sunday school classes that Luke, our third Gospel, was penned by the physician Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. The companion introductions to Luke and Acts and the “we” sections that begin in Acts 16 “proved” the matter. Furthermore, Matthew, the Jewish Gospel, was directed to Jewish Christians; and Luke, the Gentile Gospel, was directed to a Gentile audience. It was all so convenient. So tidy. It gave us a few hooks on which we could knowingly hang our words of interpretation. And then it all began to unravel. Although church fathers at the end of the second century acclaimed the Gospel author as Paul’s companion, as a matter of fact as being “inseparable from Paul,” the Gospel itself reveals no acquaintance with Paul’s writings. Furthermore, a close reading of the Gospel indicates a thoroughgoing familiarity and appreciation of Jewish scriptures. More than just a distant cousin, stories in Luke not only follow the development of stories in the First Testament, they often use the very same words and phrases. So continuing our journey through the Gospels, we turn to the third Gospel this morning with some uncertainty. We may not actually know as much about this writer as we had thought.

We can assume we’re on good ground in recognizing the author of Luke as also being the author of the book of Acts. We can take note of the fact that he alone of all the Gospel writers felt it important to tell the story not just of Jesus, but of the beginnings of Jesus’ new community, the church. He may have even written the church’s story first. His polished writing style may well reflect the Greco-Roman culture, but his thoroughgoing knowledge and appreciation of Hebrew scripture says to us that he was no stranger to Judaism and was possibly a Hellenistic Jew, a convert to Judaism or at least a Jew who had access to Roman culture and education. Our best indication of who he was, however, resides in the Gospel itself. Its themes, its central concerns tell us about more than the author, it relates to us the heart of who he experienced Jesus to be and its consequent impact upon the fledgling community seeking to shape its life by his.

If we want a catch-phrase, a lens through which to view the third Gospel, it is the lens of inclusion. Although all four Gospels depict a Jesus who took initiative toward all persons regardless of their social standing, Luke is particularly clear and insistent here. It is a theme to which he returns again and again. Just as Acts celebrates the leveling of barriers as the good news of Jesus spreads from one people, one region to another, the Gospel of Luke seems to revel in the leaping of one social barrier after another. He opens Jesus’ story by tracing Jesus’ lineage back not just to Abraham, as Matthew had done, but to Adam, symbolic of all humanity. He champions the dignity and inclusion of women. He relates Jesus’ birth story from the perspective of Mary rather than Joseph. He prominently depicts Jesus moving among and healing women. His is the only Gospel to report that Jesus and his disciples were accompanied by women on their travels. He depicts Jesus relating parables about women which depict them in a positive light, casting a woman in one of the parables (the parable of the lost coin) as representing God. His is the only Gospel to share the story of Mary and Martha in which Jesus affirms Mary in the role of a disciple sitting at his feet. He specifically notes the women’s presence at the crucifixion and the resurrection. According to Luke, Jesus has given birth to a new reality, a new community where the dividing wall between male and female has been leveled.

More than any other Gospel, Luke consciously seems concerned to depict Jesus as good news to the poor. From Jesus’ own announcement of his mission to the poor, the captive and oppressed in Nazareth to his blessing upon the poor and those who thirst in the Sermon on the Plain to his parables about the rich fool and Lazarus and the rich man to his instructions to the rich young ruler and his blessing upon the poor widow who gives her last coin, Luke depicts a new age dawning in Jesus. It is an age of reversal, an age in the words of Mary’s Magnificat, which will bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, an age in which the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty (1:52-53).

Luke also makes more reference to “sinners” than any other Gospel. Those prideful Samaritans, whom everyone knew to be the chief of sinners, meet with kind and positive treatment in the stories and actions of Jesus. The publicans or tax collectors, despised by every Jew as a turncoat and cheat, sit in acceptance at Jesus’ table. As a matter of fact, it is specifically at this point that Jesus meets up with some of the most vitriolic attacks upon his ministry. “He eats with tax collectors and sinners” is an ever ready charge with which he is hammered again and again. Table customs in the ancient Mediterranean world were all important. Whether speaking in terms of varying philosophical, literary or religious persuasions, eating customs were a critical mark of identity. “I saw them eating,” one ancient Near Eastern proverb says, “and I knew who they were.” Indeed, as Fred Craddock observes, the great infraction in Acts of Peter preaching to Cornelius, the offense for which Peter was called before the council in Jerusalem was not that he preached to or baptized Cornelius’ household. The concern posed was rather, “Why did you go to uncircumcized men and *eat with*

*them?*" [Luke, 103].

"Nothing can be for Luke," Craddock suggests, "more serious than a dining table," for it is at the table that all the divisions into which we cast one another disappear. Paul, for example, is never more vociferous than when he writes to the church in Corinth castigating them for seeking to erect those barriers again as they seek to separate those of lowly estate from those in the church of higher economic status (I Cor. 11:17-22). Gathering at the table is one of the most characteristic settings of Jesus' ministry. Luke regularly depicts Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees, the crowd and his disciples. Throughout the Gospel, as one interpreter has astutely noted, "Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal" [Robert Karris, *Luke*, 47]. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners," his detractors complain. "He is ushering in a new day," those whom he receives there exclaim, "and it includes me, even me!"

So, come to Christ's table this morning. Come ready to sit beside and embrace as sister and brother all whom Christ welcomes. Come recognizing that each of us is here not on the basis of our own superiority or merit. We are here for one reason alone: God in Christ invites us. Thanks be to God!