I am sure that we all have had the experience of being around some know it all who drones on and on about how exactly the world works. The evidence for their prognostications is usually pretty thin – their expertise on the state of Illinois comes largely from once having had a layover in O’Hare or their deep knowledge about how Air Force deployments should work comes from a friend of theirs who read something on the internet (this one really happened to me). Anyway, it can all kind of be like the story of the blind men and the elephant where each blind man touches a different part of an elephant and then proclaims what the elephant is like. The man who touches the tail assures everyone that an elephant is like a rope, whereas the one who touches its ear says that an elephant is like a fan and so on. These blind men, like the know it all, take a small bit of information and use that limited information to make grand and sweeping pronouncements. Such behaviors can be annoying or even dangerous and sadly the church seems to attract more than their fair share of people willing to make grand and sweeping statements informed by less than complete information. History is littered with individuals who read a bit of scripture here and a bit of scripture there and then through only the power of their special mind came to some very grand and insanely inaccurate conclusions. For example, in 1877 a statement was issued by the American Adventist preacher Nelson H. Barbour and Charles Taze Russell assuring the world that Christ had returned as an invisible spirit being in 1874 at which time, he inaugurated the harvest of the Gospel age which would end in 1914. And with that harvest ending in 1914 society would be replaced by the full establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Unfortunately, 1914 is more known these days for the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the start of World War I, but hey it sounded good when they were making it up.

So, this rather meandering introduction does actually have a purpose and that purpose has to do with our reading today from Matthew’s Gospel about Jesus having dinner with some less desirable members of Jewish society. It reads, “And as [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’” This verse, in some circles, has taken on a life of its own. It is the one data point that provides many know it all’s with all they need to know about Jesus. No matter what you do it is okay because Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. If you dare suggest that a certain behavior is wrong you are met with, “Well Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.” Somehow people take this passage and use it as justification for a certain type of universalism. In this telling Jesus is really groovy and just wants everyone to have a good time – he doesn’t get bogged down with the rules man. But to reach such a conclusion we have to ignore passages like Luke 13 where we hear, “Go away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.” Yes, Jesus did eat with tax collectors and sinners, but he also seems to have some very strong opinions about how things ultimately shake out and it won’t be groovy for everyone.

And this brings us to one of the problems we experience in Christianity and that problem comes when we combine the penchant for being a know it all with the mental comfort of living on the poles. When I say poles, I mean it in the sense of the places where everything is easily understandable because poles tend to be very black and white. God is this or God is that, but as we learned last week on Trinity Sunday, when we can easily understand something about God, we are probably wrong. It is tempting to say that the lesson we should draw from Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners is that Jesus does not really care about our behavior, rather he just wants to make sure everyone is affirmed. On the other side there is another personality type that is very drawn to God chucking people into the outer darkness because as much fun as it is being right, it is even more fun to see people punished for being wrong. But, since we are dealing with God, the truth is a little more complicated and a little more difficult to get our heads around. Does God welcome sinners? He absolutely does. Does God also tell us that there is judgment? Yes, he does that as well. So how do we reconcile this? How do we understand a God who says that he came to call not the righteous but sinners but also tells us that there will be ones who are cast into the outer darkness?

I do not have a perfect answer, but I think at least part of the answer comes when we think about our relationship with God in a way similar to the way we think of other relationships. The universalist argument behind Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners assumes that God has zero expectations of us. He does not expect us to change or to grow but just kind of do whatever it is we feel like doing. But do any other relationships work this way? If you had a friend who asked you to lunch, ordered the most expensive thing on the menu, washed it down with five glasses of Pappy van Winkle and then skipped out on the bill you might put up with it a few times. However, if this became a pattern you would probably start shopping for a new friend because you are just being used. But then, if this is how we look at human relationships, why do we feel that we can treat God like this? Why do we feel that we can just show up and continue doing whatever we want, and that God has no recourse because after all he eats with tax collectors and sinners. We can have standards but God cannot. Now, we of course know that God does not expect us to be perfect. If he did, he would not have sent Jesus to die for our sins. But there is a difference between an expectation of perfection and an expectation of movement. Just as I do not think any of us expect our friends, children or spouses to perfect we do want to see them trying a little. And similarly, I think most of our friends expect us to try a little. Any relationship is built on a growing together including our relationship with God. For we grow more like the things we love and so if we are not growing into God, it seems reasonable that God might question if we really love Him.

So much of modern faith is predicated on very high expectations of God and very low expectations of us. That partly explains why the tax collectors and sinners refrain is so popular – it gets us off the hook for anything that we do. And while God certainly loves us no matter what, God’s love is to be transformative. Today the tax collectors and sinners began their transformation. That is why Jesus says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Jesus does not plan to leave them sick but rather to begin the process of curing them. And by curing them this means that they will change into the likeness of God so that they may be his own this day and forevermore.