

A New Way to Set the Table

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:1; 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus[Ⓜ] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Before I begin I want to say that I am delighted to be here as your new Interim Senior Minister. I am grateful to the ministerial team, the whole staff and leadership of this church for all their help and guidance this first week. I believe that God has brought me here to serve in this role and I look forward to seeing God’s grace unfold as we get better acquainted in the weeks and months ahead.

In every church I have served food played an important role in the life of the congregation. Whether we gathered for a catered funeral reception with special tablecloths or a potluck or a youth group cookout, food made a difference and how we served it mattered. Food went a long way to remind people that we all shared a common community as God’s people. But whenever we served a meal you could learn a lot about people if you noticed who they sat with, what table they chose how they entered the serving line. You could see who was admired, who was ambitious, who was kind. You could see who would invite a newcomer to eat with and who guarded their territory. Often a canny glance across the group would reveal a hidden but not so subtle pecking order even in churches.

In some congregations folks arrived early for special meals to make sure they reserved the spaces they wanted or tried to host a table for their friends. Some positioned themselves for the first crack at the dessert table. Some entered still on a cell phone to communicate how busy they were. In other churches the meals were a lifeline for the elderly and people lingered together for the company.

For centuries, from the time when our Jewish forebears were eating in tents, meals have mattered. They count for so much more than nutrition. Jesus spent a lot of time at tables, eating. Or at least he told a lot of stories and taught a lot of lessons at dinner tables. One scholar counts 123 meals in Luke alone. One reason Jesus tells so many stories set at mealtime is because these tables hold the crucibles of meaning for our lives and have for generations. We all remember where we sat at the dinner table as children. Those spaces may have even defined us growing up, which sibling sat next to us, who was absent, who argued with us across the table, which parent felt nearby at those tables long ago, all sent messages that shaped us and our self-understanding for years. Tables where we eat are weighted with symbols for good or ill, and make an imprint on our lives, still.

None of this is lost on Jesus, as we read this passage in the fourteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. It's a sabbath meal, the most important meal of the week and Christ has accepted an invitation to the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. The tables in homes like this were set in a large U shape and the men ate on the outside with the host in the center of table. Jesus would have been seated to his right. You want to think twice when you invite Jesus to dinner. I'm not sure I would want to invite him to my daughter's wedding. Why? He is unpredictable at a dinner party, and he upset the best laid meals. He is known for overturning the tables at the Temple in Jerusalem, but he warmed up for that by turning the tables at lots of dinner parties.

This night was no different. He was disruptive. He was downright rude. He attacked the order in the room and challenged the seating plan. He insulted his host. He messed with their heads as they filed in to take their seats. He went after this most basic, most unconscious of patterns, where they expected to sit. He told them to sit in all different places. He told them to avoid eating with their friends, or taking the places of honor. He describes a scene where they'd be asked to leave their seats, which odds are, is pretty unlikely. He created chaos in what was meant to be an orderly meal.

Jesus may not have exactly picked up these tables and turned them over literally, but he created as much fuss and damage as if he had. Let's take a closer look. Why? To tell people about his alternative vision for the world. What is that vision? Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, Jesus says, **The world I envision is based on humility, and the leaders of that world are authentically humble.** If you want to follow my vision, re-examine what you are doing. When you are invited to a dinner, or a picnic with friends or a business luncheon in the conference room, examine your ambitions. Just be aware of them. Consider your options. Don't necessarily take the power seat, even if you have a right to them. Try not to make an entrance. Be more aware of your privilege so you don't take them for granted. Most of us hardly consider our privilege, those advantages that come with our birth, our education, our race, our families, or our biological make-up.

When we read the stories about the Pharisees, it is easy to assume that they were the bad guys in the Bible. It would be so much easier to hate them if they were evil. But the Pharisees were well, educated, well-respected but full of foibles, like we are. Christ counts them among his best friends, but he also sees how entitled they've become. They have grown accustomed to the best seats and naturally gravitate to them. They've worked hard, no question. They've been disciplined, for sure. But they wear their entitlement proudly and that's never a pretty look.

In June, we lost a national treasure when Mark Shields died. He had a long career as a political columnist, news analyst on television, most recently with David Brooks on the PBS News Hour. Though he was famous, he carried his reputation easily on his shoulders. Shields was known for being outspoken in his criticism of the entitlement he saw around him in Washington DC and all the halls of power. The obituary for Mark shields that appears in the Boston Globe ended with this. When he graduated from college he enlisted in the Marines and served for two years. What he learned in the Marines about leadership turns the tables on conventional wisdom. It's a Marine tradition that officers are not fed until their subordinates have eaten. Shields wrote "Would not our country be a more just and human place, if the brass of Wall Street and Washington and executive suites believed that officers eat last?"

Jesus said, my vision of the world begins with leaders who are humble.

Secondly, Jesus challenges us to take a step back and see the dining room differently. In Christ's parable, he imagines all these scenarios. What if you sit here but someone re-assigns you? What if you go there but get moved? It is a silly exercise, and highly unlikely, unless you see that Jesus is asking us to step back and take a look at the dinner table from multiple angles. Christ

throws all the cards up in the air. But Jesus says, that you will be much more strategic if you are able to take in other perspectives.

I'm a big fan of a certain kind of detective story where the humble detective is often underestimated and floats under the radar. The ability to see things from various perspectives proves invaluable in solving the crime. This genre really originated with Agatha Christie, but there are plenty of stories like that now from Columbo to Father Brown to Frankie Drake. They all hinge on the same plot twist. They are underdog stories, and we root for the under-appreciated genius who punches above his or her weight to solve the crime. These detectives stand in contrast to the bigshots with reputations. Their bloated egos and big reputations get in their way so they miss the clues and never solve the crimes. We all savor those moments Columbo arrives in a crumpled raincoat or Father Brown appears on his bicycle to ask the probing question that will unravel the mystery. Their very humility makes people discount them and under-estimate them.

As your new interim minister, that may become my role here. I may snoop around and look for clues and ask the unlikely questions so I can give you advice that comes from a new perspective. I will be more valuable to you if I find a way to step back and look at things differently. Jesus tells us as we build God's kingdom here on earth that we should be more like Columbo or Mark Shields. Cherish the unique perspective that comes from a lower profile or a lower seat at the table. It may bring fresh wisdom.

Finally, Jesus says don't forget we all sit at God's table. Humility will come easily when you remember your place not only at the table but in the order of things. At the end of the day, God is the host at every table.- every board room, every dinner party, every conference

When we remember that we are tenants on God's land then we cannot help but be humble. When we remember we are a steward of God's creation, that changes everything. When you remember that we are all God's children, then it is a whole lot easier to invite the strangers or outcasts to the table. When we come to see that we're God's guests it eliminates the need to jostle for position.

On Wednesdays I am going to lead a discussion based on Brian McLaren's book, We Make the Way By Walking. He writes, "We have created an economic system which is too big to fail, too big to control, and too big to understand"...It disproportionately benefits people with power and privilege at the expense of the bottom third. The irony is that people at the top of this pyramid are not all that happy. Many are consumed with anxiety. They are moving faster and faster; yet feel behind. They have forgotten the common good.

What kind of world would it be if we began to hold banquets where we invited the poor, and the disabled, the orphans and the addicted, instead of those we were hoping to impress? What kind of a world would it be if we endeavored to push ourselves beyond our comfort zones – yours and mine only to discover to our surprise that we were suddenly more alive than ever? What kind of life is Jesus calling us to? What kind of a world is Christ hoping we will envision together when we let scripture seep into our souls?

Let us pray: Lord, help us to marinate our lives in your vision for this world. Inspire us to discover how we might live into that vision, here. Amen.