

Text: Luke 14: 1-14
Title: Dinner with Jesus
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The chancel was full of flowers and the sanctuary overflowed with friends as the family was ushered down the center aisle by the pastor. The silence and stillness was thick – as if any sound would crack the fragile veneer. Scripture was read and prayers were offered, but it was the music that seemed to melt away whatever held back the tears. Reflections were spoken about the life of the deceased and the room filled up with love as laughter and tears mingled together. The preacher preached, there was more music and more prayers, and just like that the family was ushered back down the center aisle....

But it felt undone.

There has to be more than this.

This can't be all there is.

The congregation was pointed toward the church basement to greet the family and there was a familiar long table filled with ham buns, potato salad, potato chips, cookies, and pitchers of church coffee. All the Protestants felt at home....

And soon the basement was buzzing with conversation, story-telling, hugging, and more laughter and tears as people on folding chairs shared a meal. It's what black folks in Chicago call a "repast."

It struck me that it was an extension of the funeral. Whatever started upstairs was carried on downstairs. Faith, culture, community values, shaping memories, foundational relationships were all being forged around a shared meal. And while the food may be different, and the faith may be different, and the etiquette may be different there is a universal experience to being shaped around a table. It's the context wherein we learn a great deal about who we are and what we value.

What tables shaped you?

What shared meals defined who you are?

Dear friends, if how we eat is central to who we are, is it any wonder that the gospels are full of stories with meals as backdrops?

From feeding the thousands,
to making wedding wine,
to eating with tax collectors and sinners,
to lengthy discourse with his disciples over dinner,
to setting a table of memory and communion,
the life of Jesus is stuffed full of significant moments at meal time.

And yet, Jesus didn't have his own table. He was never the host; he was always the guest. He was always dependent, he was always invited, he was always asking. There is no record of Jesus working for a wage to pay for his own Happy Meals. There's biblical

legend that he learned his father's trade as a carpenter, but there is no evidence that he saved and set aside money to fund his ministry or set a table. Chances are, in the words of William Willimon, "Jesus and his disciples must have been beggars."

Or, in the words of Tim Conder:

He was a parasite, an itinerant wanderer who invited himself to the homes of social outcasts and dined with the immoral.

Those are loaded words to connect to Jesus, but let's come back to that.

There is no indication why Jesus was the guest of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath. It could have been that Jesus was invited in order to be tested. The language suggests a certain tension. This was the high meal of the week; this was a defining moment. Therefore, the spirit could have been: Let's see how this fellow fares around a table. It is one thing to teach and heal, but it is something altogether different to be a dinner guest.

And true to form, Jesus offends before the entrees are served.

He heals a man, disarms their Sabbath legalism, and launches into a bit of instruction about table etiquette. Jesus here seems more Miss Manners than Messiah.

Now. Chances are that the table was low to the ground and guests would eat while reclining on an elbow. The place of honor was next to the host – remember the disciples arguing over who would get to sit next Jesus. In this setting there must have been some jockeying and jostling for the best places. So, Jesus chimes in with a quick lesson in how to win friends and influence people. And there is a proverbial feel to the instruction Jesus gives about how to look for a seat. In fact, Proverbs 25:6-7 reads:

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before noblemen.

Jesus says if you want to be exalted ~ humble yourself. Take him at his word: If you wait to be seated the only risk you run is being asked to move up. But, there's something odd here. The pay-off is not being humiliated and maybe even being asked to move from the cheap seats to the front row. Therefore, in some ways this sounds like a strategy for self-interest and success.

Be that as it may, and being an equal opportunity offender, Jesus turns his attention from the guests to the host and offers instructions about where to send the invitations:

When you throw a dinner party, don't just invite your rich relatives who can repay, but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

In other words: invite those who can't reciprocate. Serve those who can't pay back. Jesus flips the social ladder. This is not just a polite reshuffling of where people sit; this is a reordering of the way of the world. This is a Jesus we recognize....

But, again, isn't there something odd here?

In some ways all Jesus does is push back the pay off. If you invite the marginalized to dinner your return will come at the resurrection. If you invite those who can't repay, you will get repaid by God....

The problem is: that makes the poor stepping-stones to heaven's highest places. The problem is: that frames helping the poor as investing in eternal capital. They serve to insure our gain. In a way, it is an abuse of the needy and the cast aside. And Jesus certainly can't mean that!

There must be something else going on here....

And, is it worth mentioning that the Pharisee host had already done what Jesus instructed? There was a man at the table suffering from dropsy (some manner of soft tissue swelling or water retention) and Jesus was an itinerant teacher without the ability to repay. The lame and the poor were already at the table.

Dear friends, I am not sure that this text is primarily a call to different table manners. Even with the central role that the shared meal plays in our common life I am not sure that this is simply about table etiquette.

Try this on for size....

D. T. Niles, a missionary to Sri Lanka, is credited with saying:

Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

I didn't first hear that line from D. T. Niles; I heard it from Mr. Southhall. He was a sinewy old man from the deep south. With skin as black as oil and hair white as marshmallows, he was a dramatic figure when, in a suit and tie, with his eyes watery pools, and his arms raised high, he would parade around the sanctuary and bellow out,

I didn't break the bread of life and neither did you. I am just one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.

Maybe the word of Jesus in the home of the Pharisee is that we are all beggars.

We are all dependent.

Jesus makes himself dependent on the hospitality of a prominent Pharisee.

Jesus makes himself dependent on the kindness and mercy of humanity.

And, ultimately Jesus makes himself dependent on the selfishness and brutality of humanity.

Could there be a reminder here that we all dependent?

We are all dependent on the mercy of God and the kindness of one another.
So, whether you have the best seat in the house or you are waiting in the wings.
Whether you can repay with a good meal, or you have nothing to offer ~ all of that is inconsequential.

We are all dependent.

We all need mercy.

We all need an invitation to the banquet table.

What if we saw everyone in that light?

Rather than the defining labels of faith or class or race, rather than the categories of religion or politics or sexuality, rather than “in and out,” “us and them,” what if we saw everyone as dependent? Not as objects for mercy or mission, but as brothers and sisters, cut from the same cloth.

That’s part of why I like communion by intinction here at Hope. For as we make our way down these aisles toward the table all piety and position are erased. Wrinkled and fresh faced, hobbled and healthy, gay and straight, broken and grateful, confident and confused... all are welcome and fed. You can see it played out through intinction. We all share in a taste of the coming banquet. Jesus, who never had a table, sets a table for all.

What tables shaped you?

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Sarah Miles, a who came to Christ by walking into a church and taking communion, puts it this way about the table that shaped her:

It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those who are cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and the unworthy, the screwed up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same. It doesn’t promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised and frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God’s.

Dear friends, as far as God is concerned there is nothing that we can bring or nothing that we can earn. All we do is show up empty-handed at the banquet. The host, who knows what it is like to be dependent, is saving a place for you. We are all just beggars at the feast.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.