

Text: Luke 14: 1-14
Title: Social Convention
Date: 08.28.22
Roger Allen Nelson

In my early twenties, I was welcomed into an upstairs two flat in Roseland for family meals. We'd eat greens, ribs, mac and cheese, cornbread, and peach cobbler. The conversations were loud, loving, and salty. There were three generations gathered around the table: Olivia, Deshawn, Tatianna, Julia, Glenn, Mario, Deborah, Deneen....

An aunt, uncle, and countless cousins who lived across the street flowed in and out. For an impressionable young man, this was nothing like my English grandmother pouring tea and cutting meat pies at the head of the table. I have since buried or went to funerals for too many, but that family and that table powerfully shaped who I am.

What tables shaped you?
What shared meals defined who you are?

There's something universal in a shared meal. For, while the foods may differ and the traditions may vary, mealtime is where religious rites, cultural mores, social capital, and community values are clearly defined and transmitted. People are shaped around the table. It's the context where we learn a great deal about who we are and what we value.

And, dear friends, if how we eat is at the center of who we are and how we live, 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 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 dinner.

And yet, Jesus didn't have his own table. Never the host, he was always the guest. He was always dependent, he was always invited, he was always asking. There's 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's no evidence that he 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, but let's come back to that.

There is no indication why Jesus was the guest of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath. The language suggests a certain tension. This was the high meal of the week; this was a defining moment.

Therefore, it could have been that Jesus was invited in order to be tested: Let's see how this fellow fares around a table. It's one thing to teach and heal, but it's altogether something else to share a meal.

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. As one commentator puts it, "Jesus here seems more Miss Manners than Messiah."

The place of honor was next to the host – remember the disciples arguing over who would sit next Jesus when he came into his glory. And 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. There is a proverbial feel to the instruction Jesus gives about looking 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 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 over the social ladder. This is not just a polite reshuffling of where people sit; this is a reordering of the way of the world.

Again, there's something odd here.

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

The problem is that makes the poor our 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's an abuse of the needy and the discarded. And Jesus certainly can't mean that!

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

Is it worth mentioning that the host had already done what Jesus instructed? There was a man suffering from edema at the table and Jesus was an itinerant teacher without the ability to repay. The lame and the poor were already at the table. There must be something else going on here....

Dear friends, I'm not sure this text is primarily about table manners. I'm not sure that the concern of Jesus is social convention or even the role that shared meals play in common life. I'm not sure that this is simply about etiquette.

So, what else is going on here?

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. I was a college kid interning at Roseland Christian Ministries; he was a sinewy old black man from deep down in Mississippi. With skin as black as oil and hair white as marshmallows, he cut a dramatic figure, when in a thrift store suit and tie, he would parade around the church, caught up in the "Holy Ghost," hollering out how happy he was to know God and be Christian Reformed. His eyes were watery pools, and his muscles were taut, as he would raise-up his arms, shake his fists and bellow:

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're all beggars. We're 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're all dependent?

We're 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 – is inconsequential. We're 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 theology 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.

Communion by intinction is clumsy, imperfect, and decidedly human, but that's part of why I like. As we make our way down these aisles toward the table, piety and position are erased. All are welcome: fresh faced and wrinkled, hobbled and healthy, broken and grateful, confident and confused, all-figured-out and wondering... all are welcome and fed, all share in a taste of the coming banquet. Jesus, who never had a table, sets a table for all. You see it played out through intinction, rather than bowed over our private servings of Jesus.

What tables shaped you?

What shared meals defined who you are?

Sarah Miles, a loud-liberal-lesbian 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 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're all just beggars at the feast.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.