

How Did We Get to This Table Anyway?

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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When Jesus gives his teaching about where to sit at a banquet table, he's not trying to be Miss Manners or Emily Post. In fact, he's being rude himself. Here he is a guest in a Pharisee's house with other religious types. He's the outsider and he has the nerve to moralize about how they choose their seats at the table. You get the idea pretty quickly that this has to be about more than etiquette. The banquet table is a kind of parable—as Luke says in verse 7; it's a metaphor for how people see themselves in relation to others and in relation to the host.

We hear this teaching—as Luke's readers in the early church would have—gathered around a table. This isn't just about Pharisees. This is about the Christian community. As people in the church hear this, it's in the context of what Paul said about rich people coming to the Lord's Supper before the poor and hogging all the food. It reflects what James says about not giving the rich the best seats in church and letting the poor sit in back. And it might be good to remember that the first big crisis the early church faced was not about theology but about who you would share a meal with. Of course, this text is not just for the early church, either. It's for us, around the Lord's Table.

A banquet in Jesus' time would have been set up with low tables arranged in a horseshoe. The host would be seated at the center of the "U" and guests would be arranged with the most important or the most loved seated closest to the host. As in Jesus' last supper, they wouldn't have been seated at chairs but on the floor with cushions, leaning to one side Roman style—so that it's said that the disciple Jesus loved the most was seated next to him and leaning his head on Jesus' chest.

Have you ever had to decide the seating arrangements for a wedding banquet? I've been to a lot of weddings as an officiant, and it's always interesting to see where they decide to put me—sometimes in a place of honor, sometimes on the periphery to make clear that I'm not part of the family. It gets complicated for a bride to decide where to put relatives and her parents' friends and her own friends who didn't make it as attendants. People assume that location is a statement of their value. That's what is going on at Jesus' dinner with the Pharisees. It's not something we can't relate to—except that it's a dinner with seats unassigned. You choose your own seat. Therein lies the problem. It's more like the dynamics of having to choose where to sit in the school cafeteria—a tricky business.

Since we're beginning Stewardship Month I might mention that some churches used to have assigned seats with rents attached. This was how they raised money for the budget, by charging "pew rent." I read this week a report from one scholar who was doing research at Harvard and found the floor plans for an Episcopal church in the area with all the pews drawn in. He noticed that all the pews had dollar amounts written in. The pews closest to the front, where you were most likely to be seen by the crowd and noticed by the rector, had the highest rent. It was something like a seating chart for a symphony hall or a baseball stadium. I wonder if we charged rent today we shouldn't charge the highest rent for the *back* pew; that's the one most in demand. But you have to wonder if churches that worked this way—like the First Baptist Church in America—just ignored Luke 14 and James 2, since they must have given the best seats to the rich.

Seeing the Pharisees jockeying for position at the banquet table, Jesus gives a scripture lesson. I used to think that his teaching was original, but in fact he is paraphrasing Proverbs 25:6-7 which says (CEB)

Don't exalt yourself in the presence of the king, or stand in the place of important people, because it is better that he say to you, "Come up here," than to be demoted before a ruler. He's in a culture that is all about honor and shame, much more than our own, which could be called "shameless," although we hate to be embarrassed. And this is a general rule of life for Jesus: Don't choose a place of honor for yourself. Choose a position of humility. Let someone else give you honor; don't claim it for yourself. Jesus talks about the host of the banquet calling you up to a higher place and honoring you, but surely he is also thinking of the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God. When he uses the passive voice in verse 11, saying "will be humbled" and "will be exalted," he is using a typical Jewish way of talking about what *God* will do, without naming God. God will humble those who exalt themselves, and God will exalt those who humble themselves. The prime example of that, Luke's readers would have known from the early Christian hymn quoted in Philippians 2, was Jesus himself who humbled himself as a servant and became obedient even unto death—and was therefore exalted by God to the highest place and given the name that is above every name: Lord.

So as we gather around this table this morning, I want us to think not so much of how we jockey for position in the church as about whether we humble ourselves. How did we get to this table anyway? Did Jesus invite us here because of anything good that we did? The gospel says over and over: a thousand times no. It was only because of his kindness, his grace, his love. Church teachers have said for centuries that the first and greatest sin is pride. Pride is believing that we deserve something from God. Pride is believing that we deserve a seat at God's table. If we think we got here on our own, we had best leave the party and reconsider. This is a meal, Jesus reminds us, not for those who are righteous but for the sick. It is not for the rich in their own estimation, but for those who know they are poor. It is not for the able, but for those who recognize their disability. It is not for A-listers, but for people on List X. He makes that point in the familiar parable which follows, to wit, you are not here at the Lord's Table because you were chosen first. You are here because other people turned God down and God's servants brought you in to share the banquet because they couldn't find anyone else.

Jesus makes a connection between humility and hospitality. If you really view yourselves through the lens of humility as a sinner saved by grace, as "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread," then you will not just invite people who can help you or who you think are worthy. Jesus gives one of his least-obeyed commands here: When you give a dinner, don't invite anyone who could possibly pay you back. Don't invite family or friends or rich neighbors, because they will just invite you back. There's nothing gained in doing good for those who will do good for you. Instead invite people who could never pay you back: the poor and the disabled. They won't pay you back, but God will—at the final day of resurrection to eternal life.

If we are filled with pride, we can never really extend hospitality to the poor, because hospitality means treating the guest as better than yourself. I'm in support of the Helping Hands ministry in our basement, but there is a big difference between handing out food to the poor and inviting them over for dinner. That's what Jesus wants us to do. When I lived in New York I would help sometimes at the meal for the poor at Broadway Presbyterian across from the Columbia campus. Those who ran that ministry insisted that there be no serving line. The guests had to be seated at table just as in a restaurant and waited on by the Christians who served them a hot meal. And then the servers would sit down and share the same food with the guests.

That's some of the original thinking behind serving soup on Friday nights at our coffeehouse. It was Judy Mitchell who wanted it to be an experience of hospitality, especially for workers tired from their jobs. It hasn't quite worked out that way—perhaps because of too much focus on music, perhaps because workers are determined to drink alcohol, perhaps because we have had little support from church members in doing outreach. But our meals on Friday night and now on Thursday night before Bible study are intended as outreach to people who would not otherwise be coming to church.

At my church in Kentucky, we were always thinking about how to turn every activity the church did into an outreach and a blessing to the poor. We used to have an annual church picnic off-campus at a park 20 minutes away. It had dwindled to about 30 people. The staff decided to try something else. Someone had a friend that did pig roasts, so we got him to come roast a really big pig and we announced the first annual Latonia Pig Roast. We got pink balloons imprinted with a pig face on one side and info about the Pig Roast on the other side. We filled them with helium and tied them to railing and stoops all over the neighborhood. It was completely free. We just thought on principle that rather than having a meal for ourselves we ought to have a meal for the neighborhood just to show them that we loved them. 180 people showed up, but more importantly it sent a message to the neighbors.

This meal before us needs to be that kind of blessing for the neighbors. They need to feel invited. I'm not interested in meals that are for us. I'm not interested in worship that is only for us. I'm not interested in outreach that has an ulterior motive of raising funds for the church. I want Harbor Church to be a blessing for everyone, and I know Jesus will be thrilled when he sees the poor and the excluded at his table.

I love the story Tony Campolo tells about the Reject Prom. In one high school some of the uncool kids who never got dates and never got invited to the prom dominated by the popular kids decided to have their own prom. They actually called it the Reject Prom. They dressed the way they wanted. They danced the way they liked. They actually convinced a lot of local businesses to donate prizes and goodies so it didn't cost, and it wound up being more fun than the popular kids' prom. After a few years, the popular kids started asking if they could go to the Reject Prom. That's the way church should be.

But that can't happen until we believe at the deepest level that we are not better than anyone else. It can't happen as long as we think that we deserve to be here. If we think we got to this table because we believed the right thing or did the right thing, if we think it's because of our heritage or our history, it can't happen. Jesus did not die for us because of anything good that we had done, but because of God's kindness. We are not in church because we are good but because we are needy. We are not at this table because we are righteous but because we are hungry. We are sinners who were in desperate need of what Jesus did for us on the cross, so we are thrilled to gather with other sinners to repeat the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Come, ye sinners, poor and needy; come sup with God.