

Sermon: Table Manners
12 Pentecost, Year C
Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Growing up in our home, my family members each had their assigned seat, with corresponding napkin ring. We had been taught some table manners. First wash your hands! Don't talk with your mouth full, wait to eat until after the blessing, use your napkin and the one I personally had to be reminded about repeatedly, "Don't sing at the table!" I was a hummer. And last, we had to eat all the food on our plates even if we weren't hungry. Because I often had a Little Debbie snack after I got home from school, I wasn't very hungry for dinner. Didn't matter – I had to sit there until the food was all gone. Often everyone had left the table, the dishes were done and the family had already gone on to do something else, and I just sat there humming. Once, I even tried to hide my hamburger under my plate in hopes that mom would let me go. And of course, eventually she would. So maybe I didn't have the best table manners.

Neither did Jesus. We tend to think of Jesus as such a polite and well mannered man, but when it came to table manners, not so much! In the Gospels we read of Jesus often being invited to homes for meals and often while he was in those homes he allowed some questionable things to happen. He didn't seem concerned about dirty hands! Once he let a woman of dubious reputation massage his feet with expensive ointment; he healed people in the middle of meals and often criticized his hosts.

In today's reading Jesus goes into a Pharisee's house to eat a meal and proceeds to disrupt the situation. As he witnesses the guests choosing the places of honor, he tells them a parable. Luke writes that it was a parable but it seems more straightforward than many of Jesus' other parables. As the food is getting cold Jesus says, "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 the host." In other words, "don't think more highly of yourself than you ought." "Rather than disgrace yourself, go and sit at the lowest place so that when your host comes, he may say, 'Friend, move up higher.'" "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke the writer loves to point out the reversal themes of God's kingdom – the way God's reign is the opposite of the way the world often is. Think back to Mary's song, the Magnificat: "He has put down the mighty from their seat; and has exalted the humble and meek."

Jesus is teaching a critical lesson about God's kingdom – that God values humility and all our striving to be exalted is ridiculous in God's eyes. And we do strive to be exalted. How many of us have posted pictures on Facebook in hopes of making it look as though we are having the BEST time and have the GREATEST social life. How often have you seen a friend's post that suggests she has her life fully together when you also happen to know much of her life is falling apart? What brings movie stars and other parents to the point where they illegally pay a half a million dollars so their children will get into the best colleges and universities? How many of us have fudged on our job application so we will get the best job? How many clergy people brag to each other about the successful things we have done so we will feel more important? Why

do some politicians sling mud at their opponents? In our culture we seem to value standing out because we are successful socially, or because we have a degree from a favorable educational institution. We strive for greatness politically or in athletics, even in our religious life. We often want to stand out, to be exalted. Upward mobility and competitiveness seem to be part of the American dream. But this parable is reminding us, American values are not necessarily part of God's dream. All the scrambling we might do to reach the top of the social or educational or political or athletic or even religious ladder is absurd in God's eyes.

Jesus drives the point deeper as he teaches whom we should invite to the table: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, don't invite your friends in case they might pay you back. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the lame, the blind. He might go on to say invite the football team that lost and never seems to win, invite the inner city high schoolers who have no chance of getting into an Ivy League school. Invite the young woman who couldn't afford to go to college, invite the young man whose dad's in prison. Invite the transgender man whose parents won't speak to him. Invite the alcoholic or drug addict who has fallen off the wagon. Invite the scruffy man on the corner who's been taught he's not much better than a dog. Invite the people who don't wield any power or don't draw attention in our society, the ones who are neither noticed nor celebrated.

While Jesus was talking about inviting these folks to lunch or dinner, I think he's not necessarily expecting us to literally invite everyone in the city to a meal in our home. Although I wouldn't necessarily rule the literal interpretation out. I have a good friend who told me about how one Thanksgiving his mother, who was a devout Christian told him and his brother to go find someone, anyone and bring them home for dinner, someone off the street. So my friend set off looking for a stranger to bring home. He walked around the block half heartedly, came home and told his mom "I couldn't find anybody." But she wouldn't settle for that. My friend said, "It was my brother Kafala, who is Muslim, who drove whole heartedly around the neighborhood until he found the fellow everyone ignored as dim witted and perhaps half crazy." And so the seat for the stranger was filled. My friend said, "What a Thanksgiving! He was ravenous . . . and so were we in another way. We were all so full by the end of it.

So while I think we can sometimes take Jesus' exhortation to invite all to the table literally, his demand goes beyond it. I believe what he's talking about is *seeing* the people on the fringes, *noticing* those who don't stand out, *giving* them a hand up, *respecting* them, *honoring* them because Jesus does. Those who are cast aside in our society aren't cast aside by Jesus. He notices them and loves them and exalts them. And so should we.

Jesus is gonna keep using questionable table manners until people start to behave as though they are actually God's children. Until we begin to see how we have left out those whom God values. Until we stop exalting ourselves and gain some humility. Until we put one more seat at the table, the table of our hearts, for the ones who don't believe they matter.

Amen.

