

August 28, 2022 Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Eternal God, your Word speaks truth into our lives. When we humble ourselves to listen, you mature us with knowledge and strengthened faith. Open us to your Word read and proclaimed today, so we might hear and embrace the message you intend for us. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 14, verse 1, and verses 7 through 14. Listen now for the word of the lord.

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. 7 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.”

The Word of the Lord.

Today’s gospel story seems simple. Jesus shows up to a sabbath dinner, sees everyone vying for the best seats, and then teaches them proper table manners rooted in humility.

Do not take the best seat for yourself. Take the lowest seat so you are invited up, not be humiliated, and asked by the host to go to a lower seat.

I think we all know these manners well. This type of humility is part of our culture. As a Christian woman from the south, I would never presume to go to a dinner party and try to take the host’s seat.

It’s thinking and culture like this that leads to most wedding reception dinners having assigned seating so, this problem doesn’t happen. Everyone knows their seat and isn’t embarrassed.

But this story is deceptively simple. We would be naïve to think that Jesus is just trying to teach us table manners. Table manners and social etiquette are not a Christian invention.

All societies have expectations of how to properly behave at social events. And these manners Jesus teaches here are not new.

Those there that night, and his first century readers, would have already know this advice.

Jesus here is quoting from wisdom literature in the Hebrew bible. So, what’s going on here?

What lies beyond just table manners?

What is Jesus teaching those there that night that they wouldn’t be familiar with? That they wouldn’t know?

The scripture begins with Jesus at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees to have a meal on the sabbath.

If we take a step back, this seems unusual.

We're 14 chapters through Luke's Gospel – he's had plenty of conflict with Jewish leaders so far. So why do they have him over?

Verse 1 tells us the Pharisee leaders were watching them closely. So maybe they invited him over to keep an eye on him?

Or maybe this speaks to Jesus' character and presence. That even though they've had conflict and Jesus has embarrassed them, he is so compelling and intriguing that at least one Pharisees leader wants to know more.

The Pharisees were an active group in Judaism in the first century – and they were committed to interpreting the laws of the Torah to understand God's intentions for God's people.

They are not the bad guys we make them out to be. In fact – in chapter 13 they warn Jesus about Herod's desire to question him.

So maybe they watch him because they are both curious and concerned – intrigued about how Jesus is interpreting issues like who is acceptable at this table or that table and what constitutes work on the sabbath.

So, Jesus is at the home of a leader of the Pharisees, who are watching him. And Jesus, a guest, then seemingly just takes over the party.

He tells these guests that are trying to get the best seats to lower themselves and take the worst seat, so that they might be invited up, instead of asked to go back down.

He tells them to do this “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

I wonder if it was awkward. Jesus, this outsider who probably shouldn't even be there, takes command of the room and then it feels like he shames them all.

It's helpful here to have a clear picture about dining practices during Jesus' time – first century Palestine.

As Elizabeth Caldwell describes: “Invitations by the wealthy to a meal were measure of one's cultural status. U shaped tables defined the social order. The closeness of your place in the middle of the U indicated your importance to the host. If you were seated at the ends of the table, your place in the social order was immediately obvious.”

The Male guests reclined on couches around the table as the food was served. If you look at the classic ancient Greek art etched on these beautiful clay vases, when a dining scene is depicted, you can see them reclining back and looking relaxed while food is served to them.

So, where you ate at this table was important. It signified your social status.

But the table, in and of itself, is also important in the gospel of Luke. There are more references to eating, banquets, tables, and reclining at tables than in any of the other gospels.

The table is one of Jesus' key settings for teaching and encountering those who are marginalized.

The importance of the table for Jesus' ministry cannot be overstated. Because it's more than just a table – the table is metaphor for the kingdom of God.

Some scholars even say that Jesus did not birth a church. He birthed a table.

We say the words table a lot in worship and as Christians. Communion is a call to come to the table that the lord has prepared.

But when we say the word table, when we think of communion, do we think of you all coming to the front to get a piece of bread and drink a cup of wine? Or do we forget that when Jesus spoke these words it was at a dinner table.

His disciples and followers gathered around the table, sharing a meal together. It's here that Jesus taught one of the most important Christian practices.

What Jesus is saying here is that God's table – the Kingdom of God – is not like our tables where our place at the table is determined by our wealth of social status. Our place at the table is determined by God.

As Emilie Townes succinctly describes – “Jesus is highlighting the ways in which the realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order; trying to presume a place in that order is unwise and perhaps even unfaithful.”

Society in ancient roman culture mattered. Getting invited to these meals mattered. Are we really any different?

Humility might be more ingrained into our culture (Humility was not a virtue in Roman culture) but is our humility genuine or is it often for show? To boost our status?

We too, care about our place at the table. We care about our status.

Jesus says none of that matters. He is going to overturn our table and bring God's table here on Earth as it is in heaven.

And at this table we do not get to choose our seat. Where will God sit us? If we are sat last, what if we are not called up?

It's perhaps easy to take this logic for what it's worth. To strive to be truly humble and lower our selves so that those who are marginalized might be exalted and given the seat of honor in God's kingdom.

When we go to dinner parties, to not choose the best seat.

But Jesus pushes us beyond the table as we see in the next parable. We are no longer the guest; we are the host.

Becoming the host means taking the reins. Actively holding ourselves accountable in the way we live our lives, not in just the ways we are passively invited.

Not the just the tables we are invited to, but the tables we create.

Do we create tables? At these tables, Christ tells us not to invite those who can repay us.

In Jesus' time, being invited to a dinner party meant you must in turn host your own and invite that person. To not do so was not socially acceptable and would greatly hurt your status.

But our status in our society does not matter to Christ.

What does matter to Christ is inviting those who are marginalized to a table we create. For these are Christ's chosen.

It's worth it here to pause and interpret this literally.

Have any of us hosted a dinner party and just invited the poor, the differently abled, the homeless, the ones we dehumanize? Have we literally invited them into our home to break bread together instead of the people we are familiar with?

Metaphorically Christ is saying the power of the table is based in relationships. The heart of Christ's ministry, of the kingdom of God, are relationships. Relationships formed at the table.

A formative experience for me growing up was volunteering at my church's soup kitchen.

All the local churches in the area would take turns hosting a free meal once a month for the homeless or whoever needed it. The meal was always on Sundays at noon. Right after church.

I'll never forget one time when I was helping at our church's soup kitchen. My youth pastor came over to me and suggested I simply sit down and eat. Have a meal with those who came. Those who were marginalized, different from me.

For it was one thing to serve them, but simply serving them a meal still has barrier between us. Still has a power dynamic that I am greater than you because I am in control, giving to you.

Sitting down together sharing the meal prepared breaks down that barrier. It allows us to get to know one another as what we are. People with our own stories to share.

Our church members were always invited and encouraged to simply come to the meal and eat. And they would come. And break bread with those who are different from them. Those Jesus calls us to invite.

Jesus' deceiving simple advice on table manners is revolutionary. It charges us to reimagine what a seat is like at God's table. A seat we do not choose.

Who will be sat next to us?

Someone poor? Someone rich? Someone without a home? Someone mentally ill? Someone we consider our enemy? Someone we consider a friend? They all are invited.

Not because of the status they earned. But simply because God choose them.

To live into this, to live into God's table, means to not simply serve the marginalized. But to enter into relationships with them.

To share ourselves with them and create space for them to do the same. For our reward for doing so, as Jesus tells us, will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

I would argue that this reward is not just to come, but given to us freely, for we never have to wait for God's table.

Being a beloved child of God means we have the tools to create it. Here and now.

And for that, Thanks be to God. Amen.