

Table Manners (Luke 14:1-14)

At the wedding feast

Last weekend Glenna and I were in Chicago for the wedding of Tommy and Grace. Tommy is our son Elijah's good friend and roommate from university days and he invited me to perform the wedding ceremony.

The wedding and attendant events occurred right in downtown Chicago. We were at a pretty fancy wedding venue, an old brick building converted into a center for big events. Tommy and Grace are doctors and all their friends seemed to be doctors or their ilk. So we were surrounded by a sea of thirty-something highly trained professionals all dressed handsomely. Everyone seemed to come from big cities....Los Angeles, San Antonio, Seattle, the Bay area, Philadelphia....no explaining necessary. But when the question came to us, "where are you from?" it takes more time to explain Reedley, this agricultural community in the center of California.

After the Saturday evening ceremony and the cocktail hour it was time to take our seats. Everyone received a card telling us where to sit. We were assigned table number 3. A master-mind had figured it all out. There we were with other Californians and everyone was our age, or maybe a little bit older.

Now the backdrop for our text is a traditional Palestinian wedding feast. In such a setting, the men lounge on couches near the center of the room, the couch at the very center being reserved for the very special, chosen according to wealth, power and position. If an important man arrived a bit late, someone would be tapped to move and take a lesser seat further away from the center of the room. Obviously, there is a certain practicality in Jesus' suggestion of why not just take a seat towards the outer rim. That way, you'll never get embarrassed, and, who knows, you may get bumped up to first class.

The table is the setting for many biblical stories, sometimes grim, sometimes joyful. We may think of Herod demanding John the Baptist's head. The metaphorical table where people will come from east and west, north and south, to dine in the kingdom of God. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Lazarus collecting the crumbs that fall from the table. The Last Supper, Jesus taking the simple elements of bread and wine, saying "remember me."

Here, in these few verses, we see three table settings. In the first Jesus is invited as a guest to sit with a leader of the Pharisees. Almost presumptuously, it would seem, he uses the occasion to ask what is the right thing to do on the Sabbath, anyhow. Then there is the parable of the wedding banquet....it's best to take the seat of least honor. And finally a word of instruction. When you give a luncheon or a dinner, don't just invite your distinguished friends, no, go out and invite in the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled! They are the ones you should invite.

Goodness, how seriously, how literally, are we to take this blunt advice?

Upside down

It was way back in 1978 that Donald Kraybill wrote the book *The Upside Down Kingdom*. I believe I read the book back in the day. In our Mennonite Anabaptist circles it was an attempt to popularize the counter-intuitive nature of the gospel, the revolutionary "upside down" ways of Jesus. This is where the outwardly pious aren't really so. The poor need to be paid attention to more than the rich. In poverty we actually find great riches. People we might think of as

outsiders are ushered into the center by Jesus. Ironically, in being a “slave to Christ” we discover a deeper freedom. In these ways and more, things are upside down.

I want to believe that in our church this kind of “upside down” thinking is not new to us. We are pretty used to noticing how the gospel of Jesus flies in the face of conventional thinking. No, it’s not necessarily best to just look out just for yourself. No, getting the most money possible is not the greatest goal in life. No, the greatest success and deepest happiness are not necessarily defined by possessions, brands, who you know, places you’ve been, positions you hold, and degrees behind your name.

Now this spirit of looking beyond, right through the shroud of normally accepted customs and cultural ways is, I think, embedded in our Lukan text. Hopefully a “things aren’t necessarily what they seem,” “upside down” way of thinking hasn’t become so commonplace among us that we can’t let passages like these challenge us anew. We need to trust the Spirit, allowing it to poke us in the ribs so that we can listen afresh. We don’t want to reach a point where this upside down gospel is just a bunch of yada-yada-yada such that we can all collectively yawn and say “tell me something I don’t know.”

Hospitality, humility, and how we live

I believe that in these verses Jesus directs us yet again to think about how we are to live, how are stance needs to be one of openness and hospitality, how we are to guard humility, and implicit in all of this is some careful examination of our own position and privilege. Look at yourselves, please! Dig down and think how the world you see might look to someone else! Get beyond your own sometimes sheltered ways of thinking!

Many of you know that every summer now, for about ten or eleven years, Glenna and I go up to Ashland, Oregon to take in some plays at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Basically we just sort of drop out in this lovely Oregon community, eat really well, sleep really well, recreate a bit, and take in outstanding theatre both by Shakespeare and other great writers, both older and very contemporary.

One of the actresses in the troupe is Christiana Clark, an African-American woman who this year we saw as Horatio in *Hamlet* and as the lion in *The Wiz*. (*The Wiz* is an African-American musical telling the story of *The Wizard of Oz*) This week I was looking at the Festival’s web site where they had a strong statement on the Festival’s commitment to all shades of social justice. An incident was referred to. I followed the link. There was Christina, the one we had just seen wanting for courage as the lion in *The Wiz*, standing on an Ashland street with her dog. She had been out for a quiet walk. In the selfie video she described the horrific racist verbal assault she had just endured. This isn’t always the idyllic town you all might think it is. This is part of my reality. At the end she repeated twice “I’m going to work hard to work this off and find love.”

Christiana is an immensely strong, powerful, talented woman who will make it through. But her experience reminds of many whose voices are much weaker, who have been horribly treated, and for whom Jesus says, in effect, invite them to your dining room table. And when they get to the table, listen to their stories, and believe their stories.

We need to be humble about these things, acknowledging our own blind spots. When we are the people who are the founders, the owners, the ones who establish the respectable time-honored ways of doing things and behaving, when we set the cultural boundary lines, when we control the purse strings, and when we decide the rules we play by or the acceptable theology, it’s easy and natural to say only my friends are invited to this table.

Our text, Jesus' witness, collectively suggest that it is okay to be disruptive at table, that we don't always have to observe proper etiquette at table. A few ungainly strangers can be offered prime seats towards the front. Someone we haven't seen for a long time can be made room for. Chairs can be tightened up around the table, an extra plate can be found, the new person can be squeezed in. There's always room for one more.

There is room for you in our kitchen. There is room for you in our Sunday School buildings. There is room for you right here in our sanctuary.

But we must not grow prideful, arrogant, or overly possessive, as though our truth is the only and best path. It just is a universal truism, I think, that as you dare to invite the poor and crippled, or whoever that "outsider" may be, into your sphere...why you learn, you may be challenged, sometimes offended, sometimes confused, but always you are the better for having done so, you are blessed. This is how we are to live.

In God's reign we don't seek the best seats in the house or at the table. We refuse to form a tight little circle with people just like ourselves. The deepest blessings are not found when we perform acts designed to call attention to ourselves. No life's deepest blessings come when our minds, hearts, and hands are genuinely hospitable and open to the beautiful surprises which come to them that know and love God.

Amen.

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