

Sermon: **The Lord's Table**

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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I'm sure most of you have heard it, perhaps several times, but let me repeat it.

Children at an ecumenical gathering were asked to each bring something for a show-and-tell; something especially significant to their own faith tradition. Each child proudly held up the item they had chosen and explained its significance.

The first child reported: "Hi, I'm a Roman Catholic, and these are my rosary beads." The next: "I'm Jewish, and this and this is a menorah." Finally: "I'm a Congregationalist, and this is a casserole."

An amusing response, but the child was not far off. There is something about sitting down together around a table and eating together; sharing a common meal; passing around nourishing food and in turn receiving it and partaking of it together.

My wife grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania – Pennsylvania Dutch country. There are several restaurants that serve "family style". Instead of each individual ordering a receiving a separate plate of food, the meal comes on platters and serving bowls to pass around family style. It adds a warm communal tone to ordinary restaurant fare.

We lose something very significant and enriching to family life and to our larger culture when we lose the regularly established family dinner hour.

I like how we begin our Church Annual Meeting, with a potluck supper. It's a perfect sign and symbol of our mutual belonging in the family of Christ. It suggests our interdependence. No one individual with his singular dish is complete. It speaks of our participation together as all the varieties of food gifts are brought to share and are placed on the common table for all. And wow, what a lavish meal it is; a little different each year but always wonderful. It's an expression of who we are together and what we can be, only together.

When people come together socially, it is often for a meal. We celebrate significant days and events with meals and banquets and special cakes. We have birthday cakes, anniversaries of every sort, wedding feasts, funeral collations, graduation banquets, Thanksgiving turkey dinners, Christmas dinners, and Fourth of July cook-outs. Eating together has always been a means of celebrating important events in our lives.

In eastern antiquity, Jesus' day, meals were especially important events. Contracts and treaties were sealed at the table with a meal. We still raise our glasses to honor and seal a rite or blessing. In that day, dinner with guests could be a very significant social gathering with tremendous social import. People were recognized by class and rank and social standing. At wedding feasts there were special places of honor and appropriate people were chosen for these places according wealth and office.

As you might expect, this opened the door for a lot of self-seeking and self-aggrandizement. Class conscious people loved to grab for the higher status.

In our lesson Jesus is invited to eat a meal in the house of a leader of the Pharisees, a man of considerable acclaim. The Pharisees were recognized as moral leaders, and pretty much set the moral standards for the culture. They are keeping a close watch on Jesus who has already crossed their social boundaries and transgressed their laws and regulations.

But Jesus notices something about the guests that bothers him. They are quick to assume the places of honor for themselves before they are recognized. It must have been like a subtle form of the game of musical chairs, as they scrambled for the best places. Given the social distinctions of the day and the importance of rank, it was easy for some to be quite presumptuous and to grab the higher places for themselves.

So Jesus gives some advice, first to guests at a dinner party, and then to hosts of dinner parties.

First, to the guests he says, "When you are invited to a wedding feast don't sit down at the place of honor. Rather, take the lowest place. Don't be self-seeking. Don't try to elevate

yourself. It could backfire on you. It's a good way to embarrass yourself. What if someone more distinguished comes in and the host has to move you down a notch or two to make room for this more prestigious guest? Far better for you to assume for yourself a lower place and perhaps the host will honor you and move you higher."

Jesus no doubt had in mind the Wisdom of Solomon, as recorded in Proverbs 25:6, 7.

*Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence  
or stand in the place of the great,  
for it is better to be told, "Come up here"  
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

But beyond good advice on how to party, Jesus lays down a universal Kingdom principle.

*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled  
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

There is something much deeper and far more significant here than simply good advice on where to sit at a party. Jesus is upsetting the standards of cultural protocol and establishing new standards of the Kingdom of God. You can't take honor for yourself. True honor can only be bestowed upon you by others. Honor cannot be traded or stolen. There is no such thing as honor on demand.

This is of the very character of Jesus. Recall Paul's words to the Christians at Philippi, how Jesus did not exploit his own heavenly rank but humbled himself and voluntarily took on himself the form of a servant. Therefore God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the highest name in all heaven and earth.

Self-seeking ruins relationships and can spoil a good party. It turns table fellowship into table games of one-upmanship. It turns worthwhile dialogue into diatribe and debate. The sharing of information and ideas offered to arrive at a common goal, gets fouled up in an argument that is meant only to win. It turns consensus into contention. Self-seeking shuts down everything communal.

Then Jesus offers a word to would-be hosts. "Don't fill your guest list simply with people who can benefit you. Don't invite those you expect will return the favor and include you at their parties. Hospitality is not something traded. It has nothing to do with pay-back. Hospitality is a gracious act of kindness. So don't invite those who will benefit you, but invite those whom you can benefit and bless and you will be blessed.

Jesus turns the tables from self-conscious social convention to the rules and ways of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God all the positions of rank and status are turned upside down. The first are last, and the last, first. He turns the tables from self-seeking aggrandizement to the cultivation of humble dependence.

Jesus turns the tables on us in our day. We live in a culture that prizes independence and detachment and self-help and self-fulfillment.

It has been said that Christianity is training in the art of dependence – dependence on God's grace and on neighbor's help. Have you ever thought in terms of cultivating dependence? It sounds strange to us, doesn't it? If we could all be beggars for a while, I wonder what we might learn about ourselves and about each other, and about God. Think about it.

The Lord's table at the front of our meeting house is a prominent furnishing in our sanctuary. As we gather around this table each month we are conscious of our common worship and our communal fellowship. It is the highest form of table fellowship there can be this side of heaven. We come in humble dependence and faith. All are all invited and are given everything for nothing. There can be no rank or special class here. All are equal receivers of God's grace and love and acceptance.

An old sanction in the writings of the early church gives credence to what Jesus is saying here regarding guests and hosts at the table of the Lord.

*If a stranger enters your worship and the Eucharist has been spread out before the congregation and there is nowhere for the stranger to sit at the table, the Bishop presiding at the Eucharist is to sit on the floor.*

Jesus once prophesied of the Kingdom of God:

*People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*

Then finally, Luke describes that last night of Jesus with his disciples on earth.

*When the hour had come he took his seat at the table and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*

And he instituted what we now know and experience as the Lord's Supper.

Jesus, in our lesson, turns the tables on an ordinary meal in the house of a religious leader, transforming it into a symbol of life in the kingdom of God.

Jesus turns the tables on us again and again, upsetting our cherished values and ways and transforming our lives into a new humanity, suited to his higher purposes and truer character.

The rules and ways of his kingdom are different than those by which we and our culture live. Grab a hold on that! If you are interested in growing as a Christian and being a true follower of Jesus, get a hold on that and never let it go!

Amen.