

Once Covid hit us in 2019, many things changed in our lives. One of the things that changed for us is having dinner parties. I love to have people over for dinner, and I really have missed this experience. I love to set the table with my good dishes and have it look beautiful and inviting when people gather to eat. I especially love it when everyone sits down at the table to simply enjoy the food, the conversation, and the entire experience of table fellowship. I really believe that extending hospitality to others by eating **together** is a vital, deeply meaningful aspect of what it means to be human.

The writer of Luke's gospel understood meal-time hospitality and table fellowship. Luke's gospel contains more meal-time scenes than any of the other gospels. In fact, meal-time experiences and dinner party gatherings were one way in which the writer of Luke described and portrayed a vision of the Christian life. In Luke, Jesus is frequently eating, drinking, partying, and participating in table fellowship with **all** kinds of people. Eating with people from various backgrounds and walks of life was a frequent occurrence for Jesus whether it was in Emmaus, in an upper room, in the fields along the road as his disciples plucked heads of grain, in the home of a despised tax collector, in the homes of respected religious

leaders, or as we see today, in the home of an unnamed Pharisee who offers Jesus hospitality for a Sabbath dinner.

The highly respected, social climbing, religious Pharisees are watching Jesus very closely, watching his every move. And Jesus has been watching **their** behavior. Having observed how they chose banquet seats and noting how they elbowed themselves into the place of honor, Jesus begins to give advice on table fellowship and hospitality, Jesus' style. He says, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.' Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left. When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes, he may very well say, 'Friend, come up to the front.' **That** will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

Referencing verses in the book of Proverbs, the same verses which were our first reading this morning, Jesus advises the hustling guests to

**not** rush to the head of the dining room but sit in a humbler location on the happy chance they should be invited closer to the attractive host. Well, Jesus' words would have been very disconcerting and offensive to these guests. They lived in and were the embodiment of an honor-shame culture in which issues of status, recognition, and score keeping were of utmost importance. Jesus' words would have been humiliating because moving to a lower position would mean a drop in prestige and a loss of social capital.

But this was not all Jesus had to say. There is more to come because Jesus is not done with his critique. After criticizing the group regarding guest etiquette, he daringly turns to the host and gives a lesson in hospitality. Jesus says, "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be to others a blessing. And you will also experience a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned – oh, how it will be returned! – at the resurrection of God's people."

In this scene, the writer of Luke's gospel inverts traditional, cultural banquet etiquette and table fellowship. First, he criticizes the behavior of the prestige seeking guests, then he lectures the host about how he

**should** have invited all those they considered losers in the community. I have to say Jesus' words and methods were not going to win friends and influence people. But Jesus was never a candidate for the congeniality award. Theologian, Robert Capon, writes this about Jesus' response:

Jesus is at pains, as [at this point in Luke's gospel] he has been all through his final journey to Jerusalem, to set forth death and lostness, not life and success, as the means of salvation. And at this dinner party he has found himself in the presence of a bunch of certified, solid-brass winners: establishment types who are positive they've got all the right tickets, religious and otherwise, and who think a fun evening consists of clawing your way to the top of the social heap. Therefore, when he addresses them, he is principally concerned to redress the imbalance he feels all around him, to assert once again his conviction that a life lived by winning is a **losing** proposition. (*The Parables of Grace*, p.125.)

We are a people who specialize in winning, score keeping, and bookkeeping. We like to strive to be first, to be important and be winners. And we do this by keeping records and keeping score, by focusing on being on top and being front-runners, by constantly juggling accounts in our heads. We are enslaved to our bookkeeping, our ladder climbing and our scorekeeping. And, in the person of Jesus, God has announced that God has once and for all, forever, pensioned off the bookkeeping department! God has in fact **rejected** our bookkeeping. Jesus warns the host and each one of us to **not** consult the records we keep on people: not the Friend/Foe ledger, not the Rich/Poor volume, not any of the Nice/Nasty,

Winners/Losers, or Good/Bad journals and books we keep on people. I have to say, letting go of that is hard, very hard. But, as far as God is concerned, that way of doing business is over and done with. As Robert Capon says, “It may be our sacred conviction that the only way to keep God happy, the stars in their courses, our children safe, our psyches adjusted, and our neighbors reasonable is to be ready, at every moment, to have the books we have kept on ourselves and others audited. But that is **not** God’s conviction because God has taken away the handwriting that was against us. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has declared that God isn’t the least interested in examining anybody’s books ever again, not even God’s own: he’s nailed them all to the cross.”

Jesus is saying to each one of us, “Listen, you are mired in your scorekeeping lives. You are so busy trying to hold the world together by getting your accounts straight that you hardly have time to notice that it’s falling apart faster than ever. Why don’t you just let go? Why don’t you just let that die? Thumb your nose at the ledger! Drop dead to the accounting! Because it’s not just one more thing that **can’t save you**; it’s the flypaper that catches **everything else** that **can’t save you** and leaves you stuck with it forever. Look, I’m on my way to Jerusalem to die so you can be saved, free for nothing. I’m going up there to give you a dramatic

demonstration of shutting up once and for all the subject of divine bookkeeping. What's the point, then, of your keeping records when I'm not?" (*Robert Capon*)

Yes, meal-time experiences and parties were one way in which the writer of Luke described and portrayed a vision of the Christian life. And the **banquet** is a symbol of the reign of God. Table fellowship becomes a metaphor for the kingdom of God, where social boundaries and unjust divisions in human community no longer exist. Jesus embodies **radical** hospitality. Jesus invites us to **stop** the bookkeeping and let go of all imposed boundaries and distinctions we try to create. Jesus invites us to **be** the hospitable, welcoming community of God's people we are **called** to be. Jesus' words reach across boundaries of place and time and call us to bear witness to the **fellowship** that truly exists between God and humanity. Jesus' words call us to let go of our score keeping and live into the joy and freedom of fellowship with God and **all** others. Such fellowship is all about grace, the grace and love in which God holds not only **us**, but the **entire cosmos**. That is table fellowship Jesus' style!