

Luke 14: 1, 7-14 "Table Etiquette" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/1/19

Kevin and Ryan sit down at the breakfast table waiting for pancakes to be done on a bright Saturday morning. As their mother is cooking, the boys begin to argue loudly as to who will be get the first pancake hot off the griddle. The mom sees an opportunity for a moral lesson and says, "If Jesus were sitting here at the table with you, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake – I can wait.' So which one of you is going to be like Jesus?" Kevin immediately turned to his younger brother and said, "Ok, I'll let you be Jesus this time."

So much happens at the table in the New Testament, especially with Jesus and his followers. Whereas we may ignore the significance of meals in our culture, grabbing something to eat when it's convenient, working meals around busy schedules, that was not the case in Jesus' world. We may rarely linger at the table for discussions well into the night, but first century citizens spent many hours heavily steeped in dinner conversation. For the Romans and Greeks, these interactions were called symposiums, with one of Plato's most famous works being called just that – Symposium. In it, Plato explores public philosophy through conversations at the table, eating and drinking with acquaintances. In Luke, there are more references towards food and drink, eating and drinking than any other Gospel. Someone who has way too much time on their hands counted 60 such references, which works out to be about 2.5 references per chapter. Luke features Jesus eating in all sorts of scenarios. Interestingly, they aren't just like Jesus is traveling along the road, hungry, and somebody invites him in for a quick bite. He is usually invited to rather prolonged dinners, banquets if you will, during which the guests, reclining at the table, have time to discuss subjects at length. Because they were formal occasions, certain customs and practices dictated the behaviors of both host and guests. One can easily speculate that many, if not most, of Jesus' parables came

from those evening conversations. His moral lessons, like the mom in our earlier story, would emerge from the table practices at those banquets.

I had the opportunity to attend a couple formal banquets while at General Assembly. I enjoy them more than the business meetings as you get to dress up, the food is very good, you don't have to do the cooking or cleaning up, and most importantly, there are so many pieces of silverware that if you happen to drop one, there's always a spare nearby. The nice thing about General Assembly banquets is that everyone is invited, whereas, in other settings, such banquets are only for certain people. Knowing a banquet is occurring and I don't get invited, I question, "Why didn't I get an invitation? Why did so and so get invited? Then again, if invited, would I even want to be with some of those people?" I am filled with a wide range of emotions. Rev. Dr. Shannel Smith asks the question, "What if America was a banquet, and at this banquet, the servings at the table were fair wages, just trials, civil rights and liberties, but the banquet is offered by invitation only?" She made me question who has missed out on such a banquet? Who has been denied a seat of equality and justice? Redding's own Megan Rapinoe and the US Soccer team are being denied equal pay, an Iowa United Methodist pastor is being stripped of her ordination because of her sexual orientation, an immigrant flees certain death from the Mexican drug lords because she won't consent to being a mule, a black man is gripped with fear when he is pulled over a 3rd time just to have his license checked. Who doesn't get a seat?

In Luke 14, we find Jesus attending a banquet of a Pharisee and seizing the opportunity to use it as a teachable moment. He challenges the accepted behaviors of both guests and hosts. Noticing that there was a mad scramble for the best seats in the house, Jesus cautions

that invited guests should not rush to the head of the dining room, but sit in a humbler location, on the happy chance they might be invited to sit closer to the host later on. This is far better than having to move from an honored seat to a less desirable seat. Then Jesus addresses the host saying don't invite those guests who can repay her, but rather invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind who can offer nothing in return. This is reiterated again in the verses after what we hear today as Jesus tells of a host who invites many people of honor to a great banquet and they give various excuses why they cannot come, so the host sends another invitation out to the poor, crippled, lame and blind and they gratefully flock to the table to eat. Jesus' lessons stand in stark contrast to a society which is based on honor and shame, that values being seen in all the right places via selfies and Instagram, who idolizes the rich and famous, who values being first above all else. Jesus words would have been earth-shattering to his listeners. Are they to us?

I remember many football games when Mikayla was in marching band and I was a band mom. At the game's conclusion, it was always a mad rush to get out of the parking lot and sometimes the lot was more brutal than the game we just watched. Three columns of vehicles had to funnel into one single row to get out. Drivers would use strategies like backing out quick so others knew who was in command. They would edge the front of their car right up to the bumper of the car in front so no one would even think of trying to compete. People would stare down others with intense fierceness. They would lean on the horn, throw up their hands and scowl, slam on brakes, and cuss as loud as they could. It was all a tribute to the human urge for that "place of honor" – to be the first one out of the lot. But I will never forget the one night just a few days after the death of three local teens due to drunk driving, one who was part

of the football team. On that particular night, I saw something I had never seen before. The first 3 cars from each line alternated one with the other so that no one had to come to a full stop. It was as if they were part of a synchronized driving team. The alternating pattern was repeated by the next three and the next three and the next three. It was as if they had all been taught, “when you are driving out of a crowded parking lot, give others room to get in front of you and ‘you will be honored in the presence of all’.” I wish I could report the next game yielded the same result, but the old pattern returned and eventually a traffic guide was brought in. It cut down on the honking and gesturing, but we never again got out of there as fast as we did when we treated each other with grace, hospitality, and humility.

Jesus models table etiquette as a metaphor for living life as poet Rick Fry writes, “You took your place in the cheap seats, far from the host, near the neglected. You saw past the witty games, the insecurities and vanity, our anxious attempts to outshine our sisters and brothers. You, instead, saw that which shines eternal in value, and it humbled you to follow such a lonely vision, to recline among the lost, the poor, to rest your head on the shoulders of the forgotten, and with those who could never pay back the treasures of your compassion.”

I would be remiss if I didn’t share a word of caution at this point. Context is everything with this scripture – it is not directed at those who already feel less than others, who already find themselves in the cheap seats. It is for those of us who overestimate our worth, who are too easily impressed by our resumes. We may find it hard to assess where we fit in but the reality is that God’s point of view matters most. We must risk looking honestly at ourselves and seeking to see as God sees. Ultimately, God is the determining factor who reminds us all that we are enough. When we look at others and ourselves with God’s eyes, humility becomes

easier; including those who will never pay us back becomes empowering; and living justly and with mercy at our nation's table with those who represent the realm of God, the poor, the marginalized, the persecuted and oppressed, will be a blessing. Who might God be setting a place at the table for this day? Which one of us will take the role of a servant, to sit with the neglected, to be Jesus in a world full of Pharisees? Jesus says to all of us, "Come. Sit here, next to me."