

## Sermon: Table Manner

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I was once invited to a not-so-friendly meal. I don't know if any of you had ever faced such a situation. Perhaps you had hoped that people would behave, be at their best self during the meal. Perhaps you didn't know in advance that it was going to turn out disastrous—your spider sense not working, no nagging feeling in your heart, no flashing red light going off telling you 'danger, danger'.

So I found myself at the home of an elder from my previous charge, supposedly celebrating the birthday of her husband who had become distant to the congregation. Unbeknown to me, others were also invited, close friends hers. The meal was served properly, good food and all, but it was the conversation during and after that was deeply troubling. That elder started with complaints about another elder, it then proceeded to gripes about the session, then her aim eventually landed on me when she found out that I was not in agreement with her. My lack of capacity as a minister was brought up, my character questioned, all witnessed by her husband and other members of the congregation. It was the strangest, most uncomfortable meal that I had ever sat through. Let me tell you I tried my best to defuse the explosive air, and only managed to get out of that meal, with my dignity barely intact. This lack of table manner on her part did have ripple effects that eventually led to some pretty serious conflicts within the church.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we are gathered around the Lord's table this particular Sunday, let us talk about table manner. Let me throw this most uncomfortable question to you today: How was Jesus' table manner during that particular meal as recorded in Luke 14?

Our Gospel reading today starts actually in the middle of that meal. Had we started the reading from verse 1, we would've been informed that on that particular day, Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees. With no regard to the often adversarial relationship he had with Pharisees in general, Jesus either accepted an invitation or went uninvited, perhaps intending to crash the party. I don't know.

In any case, we are told that all the guests had their eyes on him, like hawks surveying preys, watching his every move. It was a most uncomfortable meal, before it even began.

Lo and behold, there was a man with hugely swollen joints, in obvious pain to all. So Jesus asked the Pharisees and religious scholars, "*Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?*" (v.3) This is a recurring theme, a recurring point of contention Jesus had with the religious authority of the day. In Luke 13, last week's Gospel reading, we had just come across Jesus healing a woman bent over, unable to stand up straight, for over 18 years, during (of course) the Sabbath.

So here again, during the Sabbath, in the course of a meal, Jesus is calling out the Pharisees (presumably his host included), on the legality of healing on the Sabbath. Now it is one thing to have a contentious theological debate in a synagogue, a place of learning, to hash out finer points of the Law. But it is another altogether, during the Sabbath meal, a celebratory feast to remember God's goodness and faithfulness.

As the other guests looked on, waiting and wondering how would the host respond. As the response did not appear to be forthcoming, Jesus took that sick man, healed him and sent him on his way. Another miraculous healing, demonstrating the way of Christ is always beyond the control of human religion, and the glory of God is always beyond the confine of human comprehension,

But the story doesn't end there, the meal continued. Now that Jesus had firmly cemented his role as a disruptor who doesn't play by the rule, he turned his attention on how guests of the meal were jockeying for seats of honour. Instead of politely saying: after you, or no you first, they were elbowing their ways forwards, saying: me first! It was a most embarrassing ritual amongst the well-to-do, a naked display of privilege for the 'have' over the 'have-not'.

Reflecting on this scene in Luke 14, Rev. Cara B. Hochhalter, a minister in the United Church of Christ, created this print: "A Parable — Where to Sit", as appear in the front cover of this week's bulletin. This is what she had to say about her work, "It was a custom in Jesus' time to sit on cushions when having a meal (although, in my image they look more like beanbags). It was also important where people sat; those of more prestige sitting in a place of honor in the centre.

Jesus suggests that one should not assume the place of honor at a banquet because he or she might be embarrassed if asked to move.

Rather, he suggests a more humble position to begin with, and then it might be pleasant to be asked to move up. This parable pushes us to examine our own egos when interacting in the world. Do we subconsciously assume that we are “better than” others? Are we okay with taking a more humble attitude? This kind of humility does not mean we let others take advantage of us but that we can be confident in seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole...”

**For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.** (v.11)

I don’t know if this reversal of fortune truly happens in real life, but Jesus certainly planted that idea with the guests of the meal. I imagine frowns crept in amongst the privileged, but smiles crept up amongst the marginalized, imagining that improbability of being invited into the centre of the banquet.

Not satisfied with his disruption thus far, Jesus went another step further, once again unsolicited. Jesus turned his attention to the host. (Here I am quoting from the Message version of the Bible.) “*The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbours, the kind of people who will return the favour. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favour, but the favour will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.*” (v.12-14)

Ask the poor, who struggles with putting food on their tables, who couldn’t even begin to imagine how much you spent on hors d’oeuvres alone, but only that they taste absolutely delicious. Ask the crippled and the lame, whose daily struggles to get by are already overwhelming, who could never imagine mustering enough energy to fight for a preferred beanbag, but would simply be overjoyed to have a place to sit. Ask the blind, who would not be able to see who else is invited, but would simply give thanks for being part of the feast. Ask the powerless, ask the outcasts, ask...

At last, one of the dinner guest finally clued in, saying, “*Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!*” (v.15) Bingo! That precisely is the point Jesus was making!

In the coming Kingdom of God, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth hear the good news, and are glad to be invited by the Lord into his glorious kingdom feast.

Oh what a glorious feast it will be, where food and drinks are aplenty, where music is always your favourite, where the young and the old are dancing together, where people are congratulating each other, high-fiving each other, saying: you made it too! Yes, we made it, we all made it, and let the good time roll!

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**