

“Table Talk”
Luke 14:1, 7-14
12th Sunday after Pentecost

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On one occasion when Jesus[a] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. 7

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; **9** and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. **10** But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. **11** For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. **13** But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. **14** And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Think for a moment about the tables in your life. Visualize a few of them, the physical tables and events that happened there, or meals experienced there. As I considered this myself, I saw tables of reading groups with children gathered to learn, college dining hall tables, Camp Buc and Montreat dining tables, tables in

staff rooms of hospitals. Growing up here in the upstate, my mom's side of the family often gathers for family dinners, Sunday lunches where there is fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, field peas, fresh tomatoes- all lined up on the counter for us to fill our plates and then gather around the table to fill our bellies and our hearts. I also thought of many un-table tables, like picnics, couches with plates perched on your lap, at the beach on the top of a cooler or boogie board, in a car on a road trip, on top of moving boxes. When Stephen and I moved to Seattle around our first anniversary, we had barstools at the kitchen counter, 2 plates, 2 forks and 1 knife for about a month while we waited on all our boxes to arrive in the moving van. At Clemson football games, our un-table table has changed over the years. When I was little, my grandparents would open the trunk of the brown Crown Victoria and lift the top of a basket of sandwiches, chips, and the occasional Coca Cola. Now, we drop the tailgate and cover it with a smorgasboard and as we make our way to the stadium, we pass a variety of Cadillac tailgates complete with TVs, grills, and fancier concoctions than I've seen on the pages of Southern Living. Think of the tables in your life. Think of the memories, the experiences, the people, the events that have happened around them. What do your tables look like?

In our passage for today, Jesus is approaching a table and he shares observations of the scene. Jesus noticed how the guests chose their places and he tells them what he sees, not as an indictment but as an invitation to consider how to be a guest. Tables and table fellowship had great social significance. ¹From the moment you received an invitation until the crowd dispersed, each action and reaction was an elaborate social statement. The table was u-shaped, with the host at

¹ Green, J. B., Long, T. G., Powery, L. A., & Rigby, C. L. (2018). *Connections: a lectionary commentary for preaching and worship*(Year C, Vol. 3). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

the center. A guest's closeness to the host, reflected their status and importance. Choosing your seat, meant jousting for power, while delicately avoiding any opportunities for shame. Dinner conversation was debate and learning. For the host, invitations were extended as social capital, repaying debts or inviting those who could spur upward mobility.

Tables, banquets, meals were all very important for the gospel writer. Fred Craddock, who was a masterful storyteller and prolific writer and preacher, described it this way in his commentary, *Interpretation*. "Nothing can be for Luke more serious than a dining table. Both the Eucharist and revelations of the risen Christ occur there. It was while eating together (literally sharing the salt) that Christ gave his disciples the promise of the Holy Spirit and their commission, and it was by table fellowship that Jews and Gentiles were able to be the church."² What happens at the table is important.

Jesus is invited and they are watching him closely. Jesus knows the table is important, he understands that those around him are watching him to see how he interacts and claims authority, claims a place. Every day activity provides Jesus a chance to see the true character of his listeners and to reveal the way life is in the reign of God.³ He doesn't condemn the social networks displayed before him, but invites the guests to consider what the table looks like. How do we enter as guests? Throughout Luke, themes of social reversal and justice for the lowly and marginalized, echo. In Mary's song she says, "God has been mindful of the humble state of God's servant. God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."⁴ And again today we hear, "Sit down at the lowest place. For

² Craddock, F. B., & Craddock, F. B. (1990). *Interpretation--Luke*. Louisville, KT.: John Knox Press, p.175.

³ Craddock, F. B., & Craddock, F. B. (1990). *Interpretation--Luke*. Louisville, KT.: John Knox Press, p.176.

⁴ Luke 1:48,52-53

all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”⁵ In the kingdom of God, enter with humility. As a guest, consider the ways we clamor for power, consider our human inclination for social hierarchy and reciprocity, and find a way to leave them like our coat at the door. For in humility, we are offered the chance to see the other guests from a different point of view, putting our own agenda aside, and being open to where God calls us to move.

As a teacher, I’ve sat at many lunch tables and observed the interactions of students in community. I remember one little boy who brought his own lunch each day. At the beginning of the year, he would unpack his lunch box, eat heartily, laugh with his friends. I noticed at one point that his lunch box didn’t contain a lot of items and he ate with his head tucked down and mouth firmly closed. He didn’t finish his food either. I found an opportunity to talk to him and found out that, at the lunch table, some of the boys he called friends had made fun of his teeth and his weight. He was purposely hiding his bright smile and he certainly wasn’t enjoying the fellowship of the table.

It isn’t just around elementary school lunch tables, or middle school lunch tables, either. When I thought about tables in my life, I can recall just as many times of tension, awkwardness and hurt. Maybe even for you, around those you imagined, there may also be times of pain. There was a blog post trending on Facebook recently entitled, “I No Longer Sit at Tables Where I Might Be the Topic When I Get Up.”⁶ The author, Katy Ursta writes,

“I used to think that in order to belong I had to sit at that kind of table. I used to think that this is “just how people are.” I used to think that I just didn’t belong, that I wasn’t enough.

⁵ Luke 14: 10-11

⁶ <https://herviewfromhome.com/i-no-longer-sit-at-tables-where-i-might-be-the-topic-when-i-get-up/>

So if you're sitting at the table where the topic of conversation is someone else's shortcomings, mistakes, imperfections flaws,

I assure you that when you leave your seat, you're likely the next topic of conversation.

GET A NEW TABLE.

FIND A NEW SEAT where confidence is served like cake, LAUGHTER is a side dish and conversation that raises the bar is the main course

It's true this kind of table may be rare, but I assure you—there is always an open chair.

Friends, the good news is that in Jesus Christ, we get a new table. In loving kindness, God the host, saw that we were the poor and the sick and God sent Christ to welcome us to healing, wholeness, and communion relationship with God. We cannot repay God's gracious hospitality to us, but we can extend it, generously, to others. We welcome others with hospitality because God in Christ welcomed us.

Hospitality can mean different things to different people. I had a friend in Georgia, who invited me over for tea, which meant fresh ice tea with homegrown mint. Or another, who always had fancy hand towels in the powder room and a fresh gardenia bloom. From the short time I've known this congregation, I can already tell that some of you probably have some fresh gardenia blossoms ready for company, or whatever your personal equivalent of rolling out the red carpet might be. Christ invites us to continue that and to deepen it, by sitting at the table together, "recognizing one another as equals, cementing fellowship, breaking bread

together,”⁷ especially with those who cannot repay us. Jesus reminds us that we are accepted and forgiven absolutely by the eternal God, so we are freed from grasping for seats and called to pull more up to the table beside us.⁸

As Christ’s disciples, we are called to be watchful and humble as we seek those who need to be gathered in generously. It might be your neighbor, walking through illness, grief, disappointment, fear, or anxiety. They might hide it very well, from the social display of the table. Be ready, beloved, to humble yourself so that Christ can point you to those who are strangers and long to be friends, sipping ice tea with mint and being truly seen across the table. It is risky, though, because you also will open yourself to be seen, which may be exactly what you need.

Take heart, it is Christ who invites us. In Christ, we have a new table that says something about the kingdom of God present in our everyday life. In the ordinary, in the frequent and familiar, we are invited to bear witness to radical hospitality. Our tables are opportunities to say something real and important about the kingdom of God. God gathers us at the tables of our lives. What does your table look like?

⁷ Craddock, F. B., & Craddock, F. B. (1990). *Interpretation--Luke*. Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press, p.177.

⁸ Williams, R. (2014). *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter Gospel*. London: Darton Longman & Todd.