

“TABLE ETIQUETTE IN GOD’S REIGN”

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Remember Jesus’ mealtime words in a Jerusalem upper room before he was betrayed into a painful final demise? We repeat his words monthly at table together. And remember beyond Jesus’ cross, a tale of two disciples walking to Emmaus to escape an awful weekend, meeting a stranger who opened scripture to them? And then their resurrected Lord was revealed to them at table as he broke bread.

The simple truth is Jesus did a surprising amount of theology around tables. Actually, Reformer Martin Luther did the same, with his wife Katy and young theologues; far-flung reflections. After all, why not? Meals are a revealing microcosm of social norms in ordering its relations. Who eats with whom at a given table reflects where we rank in society’s pecking order. Jesus even delved into etiquette.

Sharing daily bread mattered to Jesus. In our little tale from Luke, Jesus enjoyed dinner with prominent Pharisees. It says they watched him, wanting to see what he was made of, whether he would fit in acceptably. Truly, Luke sounds like the social page, as we trace Jesus’ winding path. Jesus literally goes from one meal to the next. A Catholic bishop once observed that Jesus was fond of eating good food with bad people, people with mixed motives, people like us. Frankly, Jesus was such an opinionated dinner guest, I’m not sure why people kept inviting him back. Anyway, in a leading Pharisee’s home he extemporized on table manners.

Watching folk scramble for the coveted table places, Jesus advised choosing the lowest place, at a distance from the VIPs, the place of honor. Do this, and—who knows?—to your surprise and delight, you might be brought up from your lowliness to hobnob with dignitaries and ambassadors, maybe even Derek Jeter. Now, we might toss this off as a helpful practical advice, no big deal. But remember Luke calls his words a *parable*. And where we find parables, look out. If we imagine Jesus is merely Emily Post or Miss Manners, we’d better think again.

Some people, when they approach the Gospels, wax poetic talking about myth. And yes, myth helps interpret creation stories in Genesis or the prologue of Job. But myth has little to do with the Gospels and even less with what Jesus is about. You see, myth makes sense of how things are connected and why they must be the way they are. Think of Greek mythology, it explains why the sun rises, why islands appear in the ocean, why men and women are forever alike and different.

But parable is about something else entirely, even the literary opposite of myth. For parables don’t neatly join things together to make sense of the status quo. No, Jesus’ parables explode familiar arrangements, rupturing the status quo. His parables reveal the God whose ways are not our ways, whose will is not our will. Myth has common sense beneath it. Parabolic gospel is anything but common.

Parables plant invisible dynamite among us. Jesus' parables fully explode our human order intending that God's reign might rise up anew from the fragments.

Essentially, by attending this dinner party of shakers and movers, and offering an innocent sounding parable about gracious behavior, Jesus has placed a charge: "All who humble themselves will be exalted, and all who exalt themselves will be humbled." That's the first blast. Then another follows: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Can you hear Jesus probing deeper than propriety? He challenges *guests* at jockeying for position. Then he confronts the *host* for those he invites.

Jesus is puncturing our endless, insatiable drive to make ourselves bigger and more powerful. Why do so through something as pedestrian as table manners? Frankly, we cut a surprising number of deals over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Have you ever noticed others get ahead by successfully placing themselves in strategic places at just the right moment? I have. There is the first dynamite blast. Have you ever noticed how hospitality in our homes or generosity with food become shrewd ways of making others feel indebted to us so they will reciprocate? Many sumptuous tables overflow with no more than a host's smiling self-interest. We've all uttered the phrase at some point, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Perhaps in his alternative words and vision, Jesus looks to another table beyond our overweening self-interest, a table where God is host. A table whose motives are innocent and pure. A table loaded with the grace of sacrificial giving. A table of self-disinterested, self-emptying love. A table of bread and wine. A table where we couldn't repay the host, even in a million years. An opulent table where inviting the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind is no *faux pas*. For such as these know they will never repay...I know what you're thinking. Dream on, Jesus. You want to cut a deal with the earth, buddy? The world doesn't spin on that axis.

But every so often, we catch a glimpse of this realm where God presides at table. We don't see it very often. But when we spy it, it rings true, and we remember it. And when we glimpse it, we don't forget it, because it has power to transform us.

Thirty years ago, when I was senior pastor at the First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, a group of Catholics visited us from St. Vincent de Paul Society. They had tried to offer a Christmas feast for street people, but lacked the space. Would we consider working with them and offering our roomy downtown church?

When the matter went to the Trustees, I wasn't optimistic. This was a neo-Gothic cathedral designed by the same architect who designed the Jefferson Memorial. It contains a vast German pipe organ. It is spotless and in immaculate condition. Unkempt, gamey street people trudging through our halls, smudging our walls? Honestly, it didn't look promising. Our polite, genteel refusal was put gently put: how could our building be made secure when everyone is cooking the kitchen?

But when a cadre of mission-minded members offered to monitor the halls, the ground was cut from beneath our excuses. "Bethlehem on Broad Street" was on.

Remember, the mid-eighties was when homelessness first entered our popular consciousness as a nation. Within a few years, this Christmas banquet for the homeless went from feeding over 200 to feeding over 2,000 individuals. They started planning it in July. As for the food, we are not talking about aluminum Swanson dinners. We are talking about eighty or ninety home-cooked turkeys. We are talking about a full holiday feast with all the trimmings. Everything began with a large tent on our front lawn offering a welcome of coffee and doughnuts. Then a few hundred entered our sanctuary for a half an hour of singing, Scripture and a Christmas message. The cycle repeated seven times that day. Then this group moved downstairs to wait for the previous sitting to finish their dinners.

Remember, many of the homeless are mentally ill. As they waited, counselors and other caregivers made themselves available to hear their story. A small band played festive seasonal music. The head of St. Vincent de Paul walked around with a thick stack of dollar bills, passing out money. It required 750 volunteers to make this thing go. The kitchen was a veritable beehive of activity. Our church spent roughly \$70,000 to improve our kitchen, mostly for this event. Borden provided refrigerated trucks in our parking lot. People came from all over the city to serve ragged street people. After their meal, our Conference Room had telephones where AT&T was donating free long distance calls anywhere nationwide.

After their phone calls, our entire educational wing was filled with winter clothes. Whole families were outfitted. That became so big we had move the clothes shop across the street to the Methodist church in subsequent years. It was incredible: front page picture on the Columbus Dispatch, lead story of Christmas TV news. I can brag about Bethlehem on Broad Street because I did little to make it happen.

All of this came about because the people were able to see God presiding at table. They got caught up in that Christlike grace where none of us can repay our God. I never would have imagined how gladly workers would sacrifice Christmas with their family to let God gather poor holy families like Joseph, Mary and Jesus. I never would have imagined that the well-heeled, genteel, blue-blooded Trustee who first protested loudest would come and stay all day and advocate staunchly for the event. It felt good. It felt like real Christmas. It felt like the church of Jesus Christ. We were in fact acting out the parable we heard Jesus deliver today. And the usual ways of the world where I'll-do-this-for-that was for one day blown apart.

This parable is a window through which we glimpse what manner of blessing rises up as we squint to see our God in control of the world, not ourselves; and what kind of joy can appear as we trust that in the face of a dog-eat-dog world, which is what we mean when we use word like "reality". Today we have seen a whole new reality through Jesus' parable in the hope it will tease us forward. Amen.