



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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August 28, 2016

**A sermon by
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"How to Behave at a Dinner Party"

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷When 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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Our daughter was three years old when she was asked by the little neighbor girl to have dinner with her family. We were a bit nervous as parents and wanted to be sure that our child behaved in the best way possible. We gave her a lot of advice about how to conduct herself while at the table.

- "Wash your hands before you eat."
- "Wait until they tell you where to sit."
- She was not to talk too much.
- She should eat everything that was put in front of her...
- and of course she should avoid spilling her food or milk.

She returned from dinner and we de-briefed with her. What did they eat? What did they visit about. Then I asked, "Did they say grace before eating?" Our daughter immediately replied. "No... they forgot, but I reminded them."

Manners at mealtime are complex and reflect many of our values. We know that when we host a dinner there are some expectations.

- The guest list should include people who will be comfortable with each other.
- They should be seated at the table in a way that encourages conversation.
- There should be enough food.
- Guests, invited to dinner, are also expected to behave in prescribed manners.

In 1922, Emily Post gave etiquette advice for those attending dinner: "Don't pretend to know more than you do. To say you have read a book and then seemingly to understand nothing of what you have read, proves you a half-wit... above all, stop and think what you are saying!" This is practical advice. Today's text from Luke is Jesus' etiquette for guests and hosts at a dinner, and it, too, is practical advice. But it is much more than that. In this encounter, Jesus gave us practical and clear advice about how to live. If it could be summed up in two words they would be "Practice hospitality!"

I

Table manners and customs were important in the ancient Middle Eastern cultures. There were all types of norms and rules that proscribed the behavior that was expected from hosts and guests. Where someone sat, who was invited, and how one behaved at dinner mattered. Go through the gospel of Luke and notice how often Jesus was eating and drinking with others.

- It was over meals that people connected with each other.
- It was over meals that ideas were shared and friendships forged.
- It was over meals that Jesus taught.

The rules governing these meals were tight, and we observe that Jesus often broke them, to the horror of his hosts.

On one occasion he did not wash properly and he was accused of being unclean, to which he replied that his Pharisee accuser was unclean in his heart. We also read that Jesus ate and drank with all types of people including Pharisees, the wealthy, the poor, sinners, Samaritans, and women, (the latter being "no-no's). In this chapter of Luke he taught a new standard of etiquette for Guests and Hosts.

We read: "They watched him closely." Why? Because they wanted to catch him doing something wrong. We too should "watch him closely." Why? To discover the right way to live! Jesus message was clear and direct. He said, "Do this." But he also tied his imperatives to eternal truths about the nature of reality and the Kingdom of God.

For the guest, he tells them not to take the best seats in the house. Do not presume to be so important. Why? Because you might embarrass yourself. You might be asked to move. Jesus was teaching the lesson of humility. Don't be so presumptuous about how important you are. Behave humbly. Behind this admonition was an eternal truth: "Everyone who makes himself great will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be made great."

Act humbly!

The second teaching was directed at the host. When you have a dinner, who are you most likely to invite? Friends, relatives and neighbors who you admire, because you hope they will invite you back. Jesus turned this upside down: "When you have a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." Once again, this was a direct teaching and command of Jesus. It would sound offensive to the ancient listener: Why? Because the lame, the poor, the crippled were considered to be ritually unclean and unacceptable to share food with.

In Philadelphia, in the center of the city, is a Presbyterian Church that has a Sunday evening dinner every week. It is an elegant affair. White tablecloths, a flower at the table, servers who bring the food to the table, even a menu with a choice of two or three entrees. The food is prepared by some of the best chefs in the city who volunteer their time. As I said, "an elegant affair." This weekly meal is for the city's homeless, outcasts and those who cannot go to restaurants. Some are dressed up, others are not. At the table are members of the congregation and guests from the streets. Diners do not have to give their zip code or prove that they are poor and hungry... they just show up and enjoy a tasty, healthy meal. "When you have a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind."

"Invite them!" The eternal truth that Jesus links with this command is that God rewards behavior that benefits those who are poor, alienated.. the "least of these". Could a message be any more direct?

II

Who are the guests at our tables? One of the realities of our day is that people are hungry. Many in this world are physically hungry and long for food. But there is also another type of hunger and this hunger is as primal as our hunger for food. It is the hunger for connection to God and to others. This hunger is expressed in so many ways: It is expressed in our striving to make something of ourselves, to be great. We hope that we can, through our striving, earn some favor with God. We hunger for meaning, and for some experience of God. "New Age" spirituality did not develop in a vacuum. It developed in response to this hunger.

We are also hungry for connection to each other. We want to be accepted. One of the most powerful ideas in all the world is friendship. Friendship is the connection between people that binds them together for no other reason than that they enjoy each other. Friendship is able to bridge unbelievable differences, be they political or religious. Friendships reach across the gaps of gender, age, generation, race, language and ideology. We read in the scriptures that Jesus was "a friend of sinners." The Sunday School song that we love to sing is "What a friend we have in Jesus." But who are our friends? Do we seek to befriend those whom Jesus claims?

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of heaven like a great banquet, A dinner party. He shared the guest list with us in this passage: "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind" ... We need to ask ourselves are we including the guests whom Jesus included? If not, how can we find ways to include them?

III

There is a message here for us as individuals and as a congregation. When a church has existed for 200 years it develops patterns and traditions that are often the source of its strength. And yet, for some, these traditions serve to keep them on the outside and they become an unconscious barrier to hospitality. A congregation of this size has many different groups that are friendly and provide support to members who have been here a long time. Once again this is a strength of the congregation. But it can also be an Achilles heel. Newcomers and visitors may feel that they are not a part of things. Congregations that are dynamic and growing have a culture that welcome innovation, new ideas, new leadership, and is active in mission beyond the walls.

Karen and I have been touched by the ways that you have invited us into your lives and groupings. We have shared many meals with many people here. I want to encourage you to continue to extend this hospitality to others who enter into our midst. Hospitality to the visitor, the guest the stranger is a vital and important Biblical command. Invite them to your book groups, your homes, your classes. Listen to their stories. Honor the gifts they bring. Practice hospitality.

Let me share with you the opposite of church hospitality. One of the most painful moments for me in my ministry occurred nearly twenty years ago. I received a letter that contained another note. The letter was from someone who visited the congregation I served. It was her first visit. The writer told how she parked her car in our lot. Apparently the first person who parked that day, placed their car over a line and consequently everyone who parked in that particular row straddled a parking line. She stayed for the second service and when she went to her car, noticed that all the cars were gone and that she now occupied two spaces, although through no fault of hers. This note was attached to her car.

“You have taken two parking places. I have been a charter member of this congregation and when I came to worship today, you were taking two spaces and I could not find a space. Your selfishness obviously shows that you need to worship more than I do.”

Then hear message of Jesus:

- “Practice hospitality”
- “Welcome the stranger”
- “Be gracious to one another”

I am sure that this visitor was never seen again. But this sad tale had a happy ending. I read the letter to our Elders at the next session meeting. The following week signs appeared at the best parking places in the church lot. “Reserved for our visitors.”

The best seat in the house, the best space in the parking lot, is often reserved for the most important guest.... Jesus calls us to ponder who sits there. Jesus calls us to practice hospitality. Amen.