

Jesus Will Eat With Anybody

Luke 14:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 10, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?” ⁴But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵Then he said to them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?” ⁶And they could not reply to this.

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.” (Luke 14:1-11, NRSV)

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Jesus will eat with anybody. Do you realize that? There’s not one of us in this room about which that could be said. It *can* be said of Jesus. He will freely, even gladly, sit down and share fellowship over a meal with absolutely anybody.

“On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath...” This is the leader of a group of religious people who has been out to get Jesus. As we’ll see in a minute, the whole meal itself is a set up. And yet that does not deter Jesus. He is more than willing to accept the invitation to dinner.

This presents a potential problem for us as his followers. You see, if Jesus were walking around today as he was walking around back then, sitting down three times a day for meals, he would likely share some tables with people we would not want to share a table with. I

have no doubt that Jesus would gladly share a friendly lunch with President Trump, and then the next day with Hillary Clinton or Nancy Pelosi. People in this world who mock Christianity and the church would be Jesus’ frequent meal companions. The death row inmate, the pedophile, the gang banger, the terrorist, these are all people Jesus would eat with. Straight or LGBTQQIAAP, whatever letter identifies you, Jesus would be delighted to share a meal with you. Those certain people at your school, or at your work, or in your neighborhood, people you would never consider inviting over for dinner, Jesus is inviting those very people over to break bread together with him.

In at least some of these cases this presents a problem for us because if we’re going with Jesus wherever Jesus goes, which is what it means to follow Jesus, then we’re going to eventually find ourselves across the table sharing a meal with people we would never choose as dinner companions. He ate dinner with Judas after all, the very night he knew Judas was about to go and betray him to death. Jesus will eat with anybody. Whether they will eat with him, of course, is another question. But he will eat with anybody.

So picture the scene that Saturday afternoon. It’s basically a church potluck after worship. Typically the Jews would gather for a Sabbath-day feast after they had worshipped that morning. The meal had been prepared the day before as to avoid working on the Sabbath. Of course, only certain people would have been invited to this feast, specifically those who were ritually pure. Nobody wanted to jeopardize their ritual purity on the Sabbath day of all days. The guest list at this particular feast would have been especially exclusive as the host really was a very important man in those days, one of the most important people in town.

The scene takes place around a table, as is the case with so many other scenes in Luke’s Gospel.¹ It’s incredible, actually, to consider about how many important events in the Gospel take place around a meal table. The Lord’s Supper happens around a table. The risen Christ is revealed to his friends around meal tables.² The prodigal son is welcomed home around a meal table.³ 5,000 people are fed from just a few fish and loaves

¹ I’m indebted to Fred Craddock for this insight in *Luke*, from the *Interpretation Commentary Series* (John Knox Press, 1990), 175

² Luke 24:28-32

³ Luke 15:11-32

around a meal table of sorts.⁴ In Luke's sequel of Acts, the disciples are promised the Holy Spirit around a meal table.⁵ And ultimately it was through table fellowship that the Jews and Gentiles were able to become the church together.⁶

Luke has more meal-time scenes than all the other Gospels. By comparison, how many scenes in the Gospel take place during worship services? A few, but not many. Far more take place around common dinner tables. Most of us might imagine that this sanctuary is the place where you are most likely to experience the presence and movement of Christ in this world. But I'm not so sure that's right. No doubt that we meet Christ in this place as we gather around his Word and this Table together – we just spent a month preaching on that! But if the Gospels are any indication, we may have an even better chance of meeting Christ around ordinary meal tables during the rest of the week.

Eating meals is one of the most ordinary activities of our lives. If you live to be 75 you'll have eaten over 80,000 meals! And yet these common meals are sacred occasions, especially as we consider who is joining us around the table. This is where the Kingdom of God breaks in. This is where the true character of disciples is revealed. You can fake it in worship on Sunday mornings. It's hard to fake it three times a day the rest of the week – breakfast, lunch and dinner. The ancient Greek biographer Plutarch once wrote, "It is in the small, apparently trivial act that character is most accurately reflected." What is more trivial than the daily decisions we make of who to eat with and how we treat them when we sit down for the meal. If the incarnation of Christ, the fact that the holy, eternal God became an ordinary human being who needed to eat three times a day, if the incarnation teaches us anything it teaches us that the frequent and the familiar are not to be overlooked in defining life in the presence of God.⁷ Christ meets us around ordinary breakfast, lunch and dinner tables.

So back to the meal at hand. This dinner is a trap. Luke tells us that the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely as he arrives. Then all of a sudden there appears a man who suffered from dropsy, a very noticeable condition because the tissues around your joints have swelled up from an excessive accumulation of fluid. It's usually a cardiac-related condition. This man is out of place. He never would have received an invitation to a meal like this because his condition would have marked him as unclean in that society. Yet there he is. It's a sting operation and he's the bait. Is Jesus going to heal

this man on the spot and, in doing so, once again trample all over the Sabbath regulations of the day?

You see, the Sabbath was a day for rest; the scriptures made that clear. But years of rabbinic interpretation had piled up all sorts of guidelines as to what did and did not constitute work on the Sabbath. Healing was work and so the general rule in those days was that if healing could be delayed it should be. In life or death situations a person could be helped. But dropsy was not life or death. If Jesus wanted to heal this man he could easily with the few hours until sundown when the Sabbath was over. The Pharisees, however, had a hunch that Jesus wouldn't be able to wait.

They were right. Jesus knows what they are thinking and asks them, "**Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?**" They refuse to answer the question, because they aren't interested in any answer other than the one they already believe is right. They aren't interested in what God might have to say about what the Sabbath is about in the first place. As one commentator put it, they are asking what is permitted on the Sabbath and Jesus is asking what is intended on the Sabbath. In the end they want to subordinate human need to Sabbath prescriptions.⁸ If nothing else, this is evidence that it is quite possible to invite Jesus into your life, sit in his presence, even listen to his teaching, and yet remain hardened in your heart to his ways and how his ways need to become your ways. If you leave an encounter with Christ or Christ's Word the same person you were when you showed up, then your encounter with Christ has been wasted. There is a massive difference between church-goers and disciples, and we constantly need to be asking ourselves which one we are.

Jesus immediately heals the man, sets him free from his burden, just as they suspected he might. Then he tries to make clear to them their hypocrisy, evidenced by the fact they would show more concern to a cow – at least their cow! – on the Sabbath than to this human being. They don't argue the point, though I'm not sure it really sunk in.

It's at this point that Jesus surveys the scene around him and notices the seating arrangement at the dinner. In those days the basic item of furniture at these banquets was something called a *triclinium*. A number of these couches would be arranged in a U-shape around a central round table. Guests would recline on their left elbows. The place of highest honor, in this case the one held by the host, was often the central position on the couch at the base of the U. Wherever it was, the next places of honor would be the ones closest

⁴ Luke 9:10-17

⁵ Acts 1:4-8

⁶ Acts 10:9-16, 11:1-18

⁷ Craddock, 176.

⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015), 416.

to the host. At the end of the line, the place of lowest honor would be the one furthest from the host.⁹

Remember when James and John come up to Jesus one day and secretly ask if in the Kingdom they will be allowed to sit to the left and right of Jesus?¹⁰

Everybody wanted to sit in the highest possible place of honor right there next to the host.

Well, this exact thing was happening at this meal around this table. As the guests came in they all had tried to sit in the highest possible place of honor, as close to the host as possible. This was expected and nobody would have thought twice about it, nobody except Jesus. In response, his advice to them is that when somebody invites you to dinner don't take the place of highest honor. That's a dangerous move. What if somebody else shows up who is better than you, at least in the host's eyes? Now you've set yourself up for a walk of shame as the host publicly asks you to stand up and move down the table to your rightful place. Instead, Jesus says, take a seat at the end of the table, the last place, the only place left. Then there's a chance your host may see you there and offer you a walk of glory as he publicly invites you to move up the table.

In a way it's just common sense risk management. Imagine going to a wedding reception and somebody has mixed up the seating assignments so nobody is sure where to sit. Well, before the bride comes to sort things out you just assume that you must be at the head table and so you proceed to take your seat right next to where the bride will sit. Bad move. You're setting yourself up for embarrassment. Better to sit at the table way off in the corner so that the possibility exists for the bride to see you there and come over and say to you, "Jeff, what are you doing way over here. You must come and sit with us up front." Jesus is actually giving very good advice here, advice that anybody, Christian or not, would do well to follow at any meal.

But this is a parable and so it's far more than just advice that Jesus is giving here. Jesus tells this parable because he finds himself face to face with a culture of honor and shame that existed in ancient Jewish society. Gatherings like this were public exhibitions of status, not just social status but status before God. Remember, people like the man with dropsy were not typically allowed near these meals, much less offered a seat at the table, because they were considered too far from God to be included. Don't think the same thing doesn't happen today in all sorts of religious circles. We all know it does. We have our own ways of ranking one another.

So what you have here at this meal is not only a scramble for the best seat at the table but a jostling for the best position in the eyes of God. Picture a banquet where God is the host. Who gets to sit closest to God, at his right and at his left? Who gets a seat at the table in the first place? Who isn't even invited to the feast and is thrown out into the street if they try and crash the party? In *that* world, around *that* table, your place at God's table had everything to do with your racial and religious pedigree. Jews were in; Gentiles were out. The healthy were in; the sick were out. Men were in; women were in at the margins at best. Saints were in; sinners were out. The more religious you were, the better seat at the table.

Last weekend at our Winter Retreat our speaker, Adam Neder, talked about our proclivity for something he called *the way of merit*. If I am a certain kind of person and live a certain kind of life than I will be the sort of person who will merit God's favor, earn a place of honor at God's table. As Pastor Tim Keller puts it, this way of merit is the default position of the human heart. In other words, we keep going back to it over and over again, imagining that in some way our place before God depends on us, on our performance, our accomplishments, our righteousness or goodness.

One of the ways this emerges in us is that when we go through this world and interact with others we find ourselves, at least subconsciously, on the lookout for signs of irregularity in others, in either their beliefs or in their behavior. Now don't get me wrong, it's not that beliefs and behavior are unimportant. They certainly are! Orthodox theology and holy living are of central importance in the scriptures, including in the teachings of Christ. But when we find that we have become belief or behavior police by holding up the beliefs and behavior of others by comparing them to our own beliefs and behaviors and then, on the other side, feeling some sense of superiority or pride as we imagine we have come out looking better by comparison, well when that happens we know we have given in to the default position of the human heart. We are stuck on the way of merit.

When you look at somebody from another religion do you look at them from a place of imagined superiority? I'm not asking if their theology is correct because any theology that is not in accordance with the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is not correct. There is certainly a lot of bad theology out there. That's not my point. I'm asking if you recognize a hint of superiority in the way you view Muslims, Buddhists, Mormons, etc. Because what if you had been born in their place, say in a small village in the middle of a country where the Gospel was not known? Do you think you would be a follower of Christ today? And what would that person

⁹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke* (InterVarsity Press, 1974), 249.

¹⁰ See Mark 10:35-45.

believe today if they had been born and raised in your circumstances?

When you look at others with different political perspectives do you look at them from a place of imagined superiority? I do sometimes. I admit it. And yet, what if I had been born in the part of the country where they were born and into the family into which they were born? Would I grow up with the political and racial views I have today? How much can I really pat myself on the back for my beliefs and behaviors? If I find myself at the same table as Jesus, how much credit can I take for being there, especially when I remember that Jesus will eat with anybody?

Do not misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that all theological perspectives, or even all political perspectives, are right and true. I'm not a relativist. There is truth in this world and there is falsehood as well. There is just one God. This one God is most clearly revealed to us through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is God become man. There is no salvation outside of Christ for anybody. I believe all these things. And yet that's not what Jesus is addressing here. He's simply asking us where we think we should sit at the table when we show up to eat with God. And he's telling us that what we ought to do is to take the least honorable seat at the table instead of assuming we somehow have earned a place of greater honor. In his words, **"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."**

You see, if you want to play this game of imagining your place before God has something to do with the way you measure up to other people you are playing a risky game because somebody might show up at the feast who has beliefs that are way more orthodox than your beliefs and whose behavior is way more righteous than your behavior. Then where do you stand? It's no fun if your host has to ask you to relinquish your seat of honor and move down the table.

Do you remember how Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount? The essence of the message Jesus came to bring to the world, the clearest explanation of what it means to follow him in this life even in the most ordinary times like meal times, is contained in this sermon. And it begins this way, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**¹¹ What an odd thing for Jesus to say as the opening words of his manifesto on discipleship. You are blessed if you recognize that you are poor in spirit. When it comes to assessing your status before God, your rightful place at his table, you are blessed if you recognize that you don't even belong at the table in the

first place. If you recognize this about yourself, seeing clearly that the way of merit is dead to you, then the kingdom of heaven actually belongs to you.

I've never quite gotten over Paul's words in I Timothy 1:15, **"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."**¹² This is the Apostle Paul! He wrote half the New Testament. He, as much as any other person in the history of the church, was used by God to further the Gospel in this world. And yet he recognizes that even he does not deserve a place at the table. In his mind, he's the worst of the worst, as poor in spirit as anybody who has ever come along.

In the 18th century John Newton was a British captain of slave ships. Under his command countless Africans lost their homes, their families, their freedom and, in many cases, their lives. When he came face to face with the grace of God in Jesus Christ, however, Newton gave his life to God and, in time, everything changed. Though he became an Anglican priest and fierce abolitionist, he never forgot that his place at God's table was his by grace alone. When he composed *Amazing Grace* he was not exaggerating when he wrote these lyrics: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a *wretch* like me." He knew he was a wretch. In turn, he knew God's grace was amazing.

Here is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I pray you believe it. Like Paul, like John Newton, you and I have no rightful place at God's table. There is nothing in us that has earned us inclusion. So Jesus urges us to humble ourselves and take the last place, the furthest place from our host. This is not false humility, something we are to do as an act to get God to be impressed with our humility. That's just more of the same, more of the way of merit. Jesus is not promoting a mad rush to the lowest place in hopes that our host will notice our display of humility and call us forward.¹³ No, we take the last place because that is our rightful place.

But here is what happens when we do. Our host sees us there and comes to us and speaks these words to us: "Friend, move up higher." For you see, that last place, that furthest place, that place of dishonor, has already been occupied, occupied by the very host himself who took the lowest place of all when he gave his life in scorn and shame on the cross so that all the wretchedness of humanity, along with all the righteous wrath of God, even death itself, could be swallowed up by grace and love.¹⁴ The Christian faith has absolutely nothing to do with self-promotion. Instead, trusting in

¹² NRSV

¹³ Craddock, 177.

¹⁴ I can't help thinking here of Philippians 2:1-11.

¹¹ Matthew 5:3 (NRSV)

Jesus, and then following him with your life, has everything to do with freedom *from* self-promotion, even from self-obsession!¹⁵

This is the Christian Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. We must believe it and, if we do believe it we will be set free from the heavy burden of trying to earn our place at the table. Then the love of God will set us free to love those around us no matter who they are. That, in fact, is where Jesus' teaching will take us next week in the following verses which I highly encourage you to spend some time with before next Sunday. What you will learn there is that the way we can be assured that we truly have found a place of grace at this Table, the Lord's Table, is that we will begin to find ourselves behaving differently around all the other tables we gather around in life.

Remember, Jesus will eat with anybody. Anybody! If we are followers of Jesus, men and women who have truly come to know this about Jesus, we will join him around those tables full of those with whom we never before would have imagined we'd be sharing a meal.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. If you could have the best seats in the house, what would you choose: Super Bowl? Concert of your favorite band? Philharmonic orchestra? Olympic Games? Royal Wedding? Something else?
2. Read Luke 14:1-11. What do you notice here? What stands out to you?
3. Jesus asks these people a straight question about whether or not it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath and yet they remained silent. Surely, they must have had an opinion on the matter. Why not share it?
4. Jesus tells a parable about choosing seats at a banquet. How would you summarize the main point of his parable?
5. Where in life do you find yourself jostling for "the seat of honor"? What motivates you to do so?

6. Jesus ends his parable this way: **"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."** What does he mean? How does one go about humbling himself or herself?
7. Would Jesus really eat with anybody?
8. In reflecting on this passage, commentator James Edwards writes, "Pride, notoriously, is the great cloud that blots out the sun of God's generosity: if I reckon that I deserve to be favored by God, not only do I declare that I don't need his grace, mercy and love, but I imply that those who don't deserve it shouldn't have it." What does he mean? Do you agree?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why is that we are sometimes (or lots of the time) are trying to be in the most important place? Why does Jesus tell us to take the least important place?

¹⁵ Edwards, 418.