

September 1, 2019

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Over the years, I think I have officiated at around 300 weddings. That means I've been involved with the planning of the wedding ceremony, the worship service as a part of which a couple make vows to each other in the presence of God and the community. But I've only *really* been involved with two weddings. Only two in all those years have I really, really been involved with. Because only two of those weddings have I cared about who sat where and who got stuck at Table 19. Do you know table 19. It was a movie out a couple of years ago about a wedding reception and a group of disparate people who got stuck sitting at Table 19. At that wedding Table 19 was the table that was set up in the back for the people who the hosts were really hoping wouldn't really show up, but if they did they would tuck them away in the back where they wouldn't really be noticed. The weddings I've really been involved with of course, were our daughter Annie and Stacey's wedding almost three years ago now, and my own wedding thirty-three years ago. And one of the difficult tasks of a wedding, of course, is trying to decide where everyone is going to sit at the reception. At our wedding, it became an almost hopeless task. Both my parents and Erin's parents were divorced. Could they sit with each other? No, that wasn't going to work. Which one would be offended by not sitting at our table? We struggled over this until one of the folks at the reception venue thought that with a small reception like ours, less than a hundred people, we could just open up the buffet line and people could sit wherever they wanted. So that's what we did. But when it came to Annie and Stacey's wedding it turned out to be kind of fun, the families got along well and Annie and Stacey were at a little table all on their own and so we just arranged the tables thinking about who would have fun sitting with whom. But even in Jesus' time these situations were fraught with difficulty. Where would you sit in relation to the host or the guest of honor? In the ancient Greco Roman world, perhaps nothing was more serious than where your seat was at dinner. Or who you were having dinner with.

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” Do you remember that movie? Some of you may, but you may not remember how radical that film was, starring the likes of Spencer Tracy, Sidney Potier, Katherine Hepburn and Katherin Houghton. In this film the daughter of a wealthy white family, Joanna, comes home from a vacation to announce her intention of marry a well-to-do physician, John Prentice, who happens to be black. The story is of course when Joanna brings John home to dinner to meet her parents and their discovery that John is black, and the entry of John's parents who now discover that their son's new fiancée is white. This might not be such a big deal today, but in 1967 to present a positive representation of a controversial subject like interracial marriage was bold to say the least. Bold because in 1967 interracial marriage was still illegal in 17 states until June 12, 1967. This movie presents a cultural taboo of that time and it does so around the dinner table, because who's at the table says something about who's in and who's out. The table is not only where one may say grace; it is the space where one extends grace. Tables in the ancient world were places where philosophers and teacher could impart their wisdom. Table were also the place where a community's identity could be marked; a Near Eastern proverb declares, “I saw them eating and I knew who they were,” and this was not by how they ate. Who one ate with says something about you and your company. To Luke, “nothing is more serious than a dining table.” (Fred Craddock). In the gospels generally and in the gospel of Luke particularly, meals are metaphors for the Kingdom of God. The table is taken so seriously that Jesus gets into trouble because of who he eats with. He was known as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” because he ate with them. Inviting others to a table could be a sign of affluence or status, but could also be a sign of service or a sign of acceptance as equals, creating egalitarian and fellowship through the breaking of bread. Table fellowship mean full acceptance of one another and the inclusiveness of Jesus by the company he kept, especially of the socially ostracized was suspect. People even questioned Simon Peter when he goes to the Gentile Cornelius' house in The Acts of the Apostles, asking “Why did you go to the house of uncircumcised men and *eat with them?*”

There could be trouble due to the table because one's table fellowship does not lie. Going to the other's

house was bad enough, but to eat at the same table!? The table says something about who's in and who's out.¹

What about our table? Who is welcome here? It seems to be that the point of the story today is not where we sit at the table, but who is invited to the table. If we care about where we are in the pecking order, we've missed the boat. Because in the kingdom of God there is no pecking order. And after all, this is not our table. It's not a Presbyterian table or the table of the church. It is Jesus' table. And everyone is invited. As the pastor and scholar Debie Thomas puts it, "Because *this is who God is*, the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. Because there is no end to the game of who is "in" and who is "out," and God in his wisdom knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation. Because God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are already welcome, already loved, already cherished. Because the currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear."²

It was once the tradition in some European countries to set the Christmas Eve table with a place set for the unexpected guest. The most intimate family meal of the year provided for including a stranger who represented the Child for whom there had been no room at the inn. He invites us to his table. How much room is there in ours?

1 Powery, Luke. "The Welcome Table," Duke University Chapel, Sept. 1, 2013

2 Thomas, Debie. *Journey with Jesus*. "Table Manners" 2016.