

Table Grace

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 14:1, 7-14 August 28, 2016 Pentecost 15C

Growing up poor, my family didn't have much experience with fine dining. We went to family holiday meals, but that was family. We ate out every now and then, but nowhere fancy. When I went to Culver-Stockton College, I discovered that the dining hall there was a place where we were supposed to learn manners. Someone would mumble grace over the PA system, and then the wait staff brought out trays of food. The meals were served family style around tables of ten. The person at the head of the table was responsible for the bowls of potatoes and platters of meat to be passed. Of course, once in a while I would flirt with a cute waitress named Sandy McBride, and would send her notes on tea bag wrappers, or maybe even try to untie her apron strings.

Then I was on my own during my first year of seminary—Sandy was finishing college that year. When Thanksgiving weekend came, I was one of a few students who didn't have places to go, families to be with, for the holiday. So I was delighted when Dr. Lester Grove McAllister, our droll bachelor American Church History professor, invited me and another student from rural Kentucky, to thanksgiving at his home. We went to his house, we visited there, and then we piled into his car and he drove us to the Indianapolis Athletic Club, a posh club in downtown Indianapolis. There, uniformed waiters led us to tables with linen table cloths and napkins, crystal glasses, and fine china. And there were pieces of silverware that I had no idea of their purpose. I didn't sip from the finger bowl, or do something too terribly gauche, but I sure knew that this was not the kind of place where you would normally find my kind of people! Dr. McAllister was a gracious, witty host, and he made us feel welcome in that exotic upscale place. He was gracious—he had grace—and what could have been a terrifying experience was a positive learning experience for two green young seminarians.

We've all had moments at nice dinners where we've enjoyed the food, and enjoyed the company, but maybe felt a little out of place; or maybe we sensed tension in the air but didn't know how to address it.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus came to a dinner party, but it wasn't a very relaxing one. Have you ever been taken to dinner as part of a job interview? The idea's to relax, enjoy yourself, and make new friends, right? Not completely. You know as you take care not to let the pasta sauce drip onto your shirt that you are under scrutiny. Your potential employer is checking you out for how you handle yourself socially, what you drink and how much, and what kind of entrée you order on company money. Relax? I don't think

so. Jesus wasn't applying for a job, but he was under careful scrutiny. He was a dinner guest at a group of Pharisees. Now don't think that just because they're Pharisees that they are the bad guys, or that they were all enemies of Jesus. Pharisees had a lot about them that was admirable. We might call them spiritual athletes. Pharisees were lay people so committed to following God's law that they went the extra mile. They not only followed the law of Moses as it was given to lay people, but they followed the law as it was given for priests. They kicked it up a notch.

Now the laws and traditions that they followed while eating a meal were pretty complex. They were testing Jesus, to be sure. They were trying to figure him out. Where was he coming from? What were his values? Was he really as impressive as his reputation said he was? Was he from God, or was he just a charlatan, a rabble-rouser?

Jesus must not have read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Jesus must not have been interviewing for a job, because Jesus just started right off, challenging people, offending people, embarrassing people. In the verses omitted from our Gospel lesson, Jesus healed a man with Dropsy. That's an old-fashioned diagnosis for someone whose body, especially his joints, retained fluid. So Jesus asked, "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath?" Everyone was afraid to answer. So Jesus healed the man, and used a similar teaching to last week's text. If a child or animal fell down the well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you rescue him?" If it's legal to perform acts of mercy and compassion on the Sabbath, then why couldn't suffering people be healed?

Moving up the corporate ladder, moving up the totem pole, is nothing new. Jesus noticed how the guests at the meal were jockeying for position, trying to move to the best seats in the house, trying to show themselves as people of importance. Jesus told them not to organize their dinners around pride, but around humility. If you think that you deserve to be at the head table but the host doesn't, then you might end up totally embarrassed. But if you don't make a big deal of yourself, your host might make a big deal of you. Jesus wasn't exactly a "let your people do lunch with my people" sort of guy, was he?

Then, just as everybody was getting more and more nervous and awkward, and wondering who let this Jesus in, he even went a step beyond. After giving etiquette lessons for the guests, he now gave them to the host. When you have a dinner, don't invite just those who are rich, or who are family, or who will help you get ahead. Experience a blessing by inviting the misfits, the folks from the wrong side of the tracks, those who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

We know of people who started at the head of the table and voluntarily moved down, because that's what Jesus did. St. Francis of Assisi was the

son of a rich merchant who gave away everything he had to take on a life of poverty. On Wednesday evenings, we've been watching "Briars in the Cotton Patch," and we learned how Clarence Jordan was a son of a wealthy banking family and gave it all up to begin an interracial Christian community called Koinonia Farms. Millard and Linda Fuller were wealthy people who wanted something better, so after visiting Koinonia Farms, they gave away what they had and ended up starting Habitat for Humanity, to provide housing for the poor and homeless. They did that in the name of Jesus, who, according to Philippians 2, "Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."¹

And what of us today? Humility and compassion are in short supply in a me-first culture. Is it just that I'm getting older, or are people getting ruder and more aggressive? If you need to move over a lane on the highway, how many people wave you in, versus how many cut you out? And political discussion isn't dialogue anymore, it's cut and burn, innuendoes and personal attacks, rather than candidates exchanging ideas on how to solve the nation's problems. It's a tough world, and the style of life that Jesus recommends doesn't seem to be in vogue.

Still, though, it's the way of life, the way of love, which takes us back to the great commandment, to love God completely, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Everything that Jesus said at that dinner party came out of a desire to shake these people up so that they could see that, so that they could extend true hospitality. We as a church are really good at extending hospitality; at making guests feel welcome; at helping people in need; and at viewing our common tables as places where God is present. I want to affirm that behavior, and urge us to keep it up and to build upon it.

Being kind, being gracious, taking a while to listen to someone even if you've heard all their whining and complaints before, isn't a commandment, but it is humanizing. It does open us to be able to perceive Christ in others, and for others to know something of the Christ for having known us. It's countercultural, isn't it? Christians are invited, called even, to be the light, to be the leaven, to be the salt that makes life gentler, kinder, happier. It's the little things that count. Amen.

¹ Philippians 2:6-8