

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost (C/RCL)

Luke 14.1, 7-14

September 2, 2007

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Here's a question for you if there's anybody else living under your roof (or if there ever has been!): do meal times go down the way you really want them to? Or do you go crazy because it's so hard to get people to sit down in the same place at the same time? "Dinner's ready!" No response. "Hello, is anyone there? Dinner's on the table!" "It's getting cold!" Or, everybody shows up on cue because they're hungry, and then they start to eat while the person who is serving is still standing. At that point I launch into a mini-mealtime sermon about how the courteous thing to do is to offer to help to speed up the process or at least wait to dive in until the cook sits down and everyone says the blessing. Basic etiquette ☺, along with another tabletime rule my dad taught my two sisters and me and which he has drilled into Kristiane: "No elbows on the table!"

I also learned, "No singing at the table," which is a sure sign I didn't grow up Lutheran! I think that rule is related to, "Don't talk with your mouth full," intended to spare the person sitting across from you the nasty sight of half-chewed food in your mouth.

There were table rules in Jesus' day, too, and some weren't so different from ours. When Jesus and His friends were invited to a fancy dinner party, they didn't rush in and choose the best seats, closest to the host, for themselves. They waited to be told where to sit by the person who had invited them, like we do when we go to a wedding reception and look for the place card that tells us which table is ours. We don't park ourselves at the head table. Today's first lesson from the Book of Proverbs and our Gospel reinforce what our mothers have told us all along: "Mind your manners."

Have you ever noticed how often St. Luke mentions meals? The man must have loved to eat. He sure pictures Jesus that way! Remember the picnic that started out with five loaves and two fish to feed over 5,000 people? The dinner party at which the woman with the alabaster jar washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair? Martha's famous accusation that her sister Mary was being a couch potato by sitting at Jesus' feet instead of slaving in the kitchen? The Last Supper and the dinner after Jesus' resurrection with the disciples from Emmaus who knew Him in the breaking of the bread? Sharing meals together is at the heart of community. The word "companion" means the one **with** whom I eat **bread**.... We are "companions" in the Christian journey, as much as our Lord Jesus and His first disciples were.

That said, and truth be told, today's Gospel doesn't just remind us, "Mind your manners." It also says, "Change your mindset." Expand the guest list. Send an enthusiastic invitation, extend a warm welcome, to those who would least expect it.

Jesus issues a tough challenge to the man who invited him for dinner in today's Gospel.

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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Luke 14.12-13

Imagine your guest list for the annual Christmas party you throw, or the annual summer picnic you organize, or the semi-annual family reunion. Imagine inviting no one you have ever invited before. Imagine inviting people with whom you seem to have nothing in common. Imagine inviting an entire roomful of people you will probably never see again. Radical, isn't it?

To see **just** how radical, let's think of the people to whom Jesus was saying all this. They were observant Jews. Including the poor wouldn't have been a strange concept to them. They knew the Book of Deuteronomy specifically urges generosity to foreigners ("resident aliens"), orphans and widows (Dt. 14.29). Jesus really started to color outside the lines, though, when He tacked onto the list of preferred guests, "the crippled, the lame and the blind." Those were the

people the Book of Leviticus said were too imperfect to serve at the Lord's altar as priests (Lev. 21.17-23), "to offer the bread of... God." People assumed they were sinful because they were disabled. They would **not** be the first ones to come to mind when throwing a party, especially if the host was part of the religious Establishment, like the Pharisee who included Jesus on his guest list in this story.

This Gospel opens our eyes to who will be on God's guest list in the Kingdom **later**, so that we'll be sure to welcome them **now** to the Lord's Supper, the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the marriage feast of the Lamb. We're blessed to be part of a church family that has an "open table" at Holy Communion, not requiring that people show Holy Trinity ID cards at the door, or even Lutheran credentials. We realize that Jesus is the host at this meal, the host who invites the guests, and the Host on which the guests dine. We are like waiters who serve the meal Someone else has prepared. Who are we to say "No, you can't have any!" to those for whom the Host lay down His life?

We don't bar the door to anyone. Once people arrive, we welcome them. But today's Gospel makes us ask, "How much initiative do we take to invite those who are outside in?" I would say we do a good job welcoming those who are literally "the crippled, the lame, and the blind." In the twenty-first century, though, here at the Jersey Shore, there are others who have taken the place of the physically handicapped on the less-desired guest list.

They include some of the people we reach out to with money and food and clothes. We hear our Lord saying, "Whenever you did it to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to Me," and so we do our best to share our material blessings and our verbal encouragement. Today we're invited to ask, though, would we seek out and then welcome these same people to pray beside us in the pew?

Our Women of the ELCA support RedeemHer, a ministry to women who have been recently released from prison. Would we welcome one of those women ready to make a fresh

start into our community? In relating to us, would she experience the acceptance of the One who said, “See, I make all things new”? Our youth regularly send monetary gifts to Dr. Anna Sweany’s Providence Medical Clinic for the working poor. Would we welcome one of her patients who barely speaks English to share in our life together? We open our doors to the Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous communities, so they can hold meetings here. Do we embrace their members as Holy Trinity members, too?

I’m hopeful that these hurting children of God **would** receive a warm welcome from us, because others have in the past. We’ve extended such a welcome to a man who swam the RioGrande to raise his family up from poverty. We’ve received as members those who are developmentally disabled or mentally ill and who lived in the group home that used to be down the block. This community **is** mindful that we should “not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13.2). The **next** step is to seek these folks out and not just wait for them to show up at the door. It’s basic etiquette at the Lord’s Table, a little foreshadowing of God’s guest list in the future. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham