

Sit in your seat. Small bites, Missy. Shhh... the adults are talking. Use your napkin, not your sleeve. Remember, young ladies are to be seen, not heard.

Any of that sound familiar? I was grateful when my aunt started a family tradition of having a Kids' Table at holiday meals for me and my cousins. The pressure was suddenly off ~ I got to sit between two cousins (Andrew who was closest to me in age and Beth whom I adored) rather than the appointed spot next to my mom. No one would scold me if my elbow rested on the edge. If I accidentally gulped my milk, no one fussed.

I can't help but feel a bit petulantly smug about today's reading, and knowing (in that place in me that knows such things) that Jesus would have chosen to join us at the Kids' Table. We laughed more and I think we had more fun.

Table manners can be hard to take for little ones. For adults, too, for that matter. Manners, as we all know, are how we present ourselves, the way we behave when interacting with others; they are an uncodified body of mores that evolves in each cultural context, and following them indicates respect and a willingness to live together peaceably. However, as many of us learn as we mature, many points of etiquette serve little more purpose than to indicate a social hierarchy and a certain type of upbringing. This time of year, I'm reminded of all the rights and wrongs of wearing certain clothes or shoes before or after Labor Day. These unspoken rules have nothing to do with personal style or comfort, respectfulness or respectability, they are just subtle ways the thoroughbreds segregate themselves from the common farm mules.

Jesus is enjoying a moment of quiet as the unnamed prominent member of the Pharisees and his dinner guests sit down for a meal. Jesus is people-watching, and notices that many seem awkward in finding their seats, leading him into a parable about table manners.

Eating together is one of the most complicated of human relationships. Tension can be high for a middle schooler finding a table to join in a school cafeteria or for a blended family sorting themselves out a holiday meal. Coffee can be kindly or impersonally served to a lonely person in a café; a friendly smile added to the first

jello or broth after surgery can make a long-lasting memory. Past invitations received or unreceived, peaceful or fraught family dinners, or a single thoughtless comment or lack of courtesy can flavor holidays and gatherings for years to come.

As host, it's not much easier. From the time of Sarah and Abraham's hospitality to three strangers who turned out to be God, through the history of settled and nomadic people who based their honor on a ready willingness to invite and then protect anyone who needed food and shelter, on to the tense days of Roman occupation when Jesus gathers with this particular group ... sharing a meal remained a central proof and exercise of faith.

Even today, nourishing one's body and nourishing one's soul both find their place in the context of a meal shared in community. The host's work is to provide this nourishment, the guest's work is to receive the gifts of food and hospitality with gratitude.

Back in Jesus' day, the true test of inclusion was not whether a person was baptized into the community, it was whether a person was invited to sit and break bread in that community.

The etiquette of inclusion and acceptance runs throughout the Gospels in the stories we've received of Jesus sitting at a variety of different tables in a variety of different settings: at Simon Peter's mother-in-law's home, with Simon-the disapprover¹, with Zacchaeus the repentant cheat, with Martha, with his disciples in the upper room, and among the Emmaus travelers who threw together an impromptu supper. Each of these stories are about ordinary eating.

Sidenote: I chose to include in the Gospel reading this morning the verses that our lectionary leaves out. There is a power play going on that could be missed if we skip over the story about the ill man.

This, it seems, was not an ordinary meal. Several verses prior to this passage, a few Pharisees sought Jesus out and told him he needed to keep his head down, because Herod wanted to kill him.² And so it may have been the case that **this** prominent Pharisee we encounter this morning was part of that group intent on setting Jesus up: we are told, after all, that Jesus was being "very carefully watched." As the mobster Michael Corleone says in *The Godfather Part II*, the

¹ Luke 7:36-50

² Luke 13:31

most valuable lesson his mafia father ever taught him was “Keep your friends close but keep your enemies closer.”

I suspect that this dynamic was partly behind this Pharisee’s inviting Jesus for a sabbath meal, not long after he had healed the woman who was stooped over on a Sabbath, as we heard last week. As such, it is neither accidental nor coincidental that Jesus immediately encounters a man with dropsy. Dropsy was what we would now call edema, which likely meant his breathing was labored, his face, legs, feet, and hands were swollen. Likely he looked very unwell.

In any event, lo and behold this is the *first* person Jesus meets up with at the pre-dinner punch bowl ~ the perfect prop to trip Jesus up under the watchful eyes of a group of nefarious Pharisees. Would this Jesus, reputed to be a healer, resist the urge (considering it was the Sabbath) to help this fellow? Initially Jesus seems to be the epitome of a polite guest, asking his host and the others, “Would it be all right by you if I healed this man? Is that a lawful thing to do on the Sabbath?”

Silence.

Did they all think this was such an obvious question it did not require an answer? Or did the way they all fixed Jesus in their collective glare as much as tell Jesus that *of course* they considered it unlawful. But their silence dared Jesus to do it anyway. So he does. He then quotes some laws from Leviticus and Deuteronomy that allow exceptions to the Sabbath injunctions against not working in the cases of sick children or suffering animals. It was an “in your face” kind of thing for Jesus to say, shaming them for their disapproval of this poor man’s healing and, as the text makes clear, leaving them with nothing to say.

Luke doesn’t tell us exactly how that Sabbath-day dinner party ended. But I have the feeling that when Jesus left, his host did not smile and say, “Come again!” In fact, in the balance of Luke’s gospel we will not again read that Jesus was the guest of a Pharisee ~ or any other religious authority. The next dinner party Jesus attends is at the beginning of Luke 15, but this time he is the guest of ‘tax collectors and sinners.’³ Small wonder that following this parable about table manners—in what will be the Gospel lesson for next Sunday—Luke shows Jesus talking about the cost of discipleship and how much a person must be willing to give up if he or she truly

³ The tension between Jesus and the Pharisees will have come to a head: the Pharisees will watch Jesus go into that party and condemn him loudly for doing it.

wants to follow after Jesus. (Spoiler alert: followers of Jesus will have to give up a bit more than a simple invitation to dinner.)

Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit matters not a whit ~ at God's Table, we all have a seat of honor. Whether or not we show up to the Table, however, because it indicates how and where we seek our nourishment. How do we respond to our Lord's invitation? And do we extend that same invitation to others, letting them know that they are also invited and welcome and loved? Jesus says, favor the ones who cannot repay you. Prefer the poor. Choose obscurity. Maybe find a seat among the little kids. This is God's world we live in, and nothing here is ordinary.⁴

⁴ Debi Thomas, 2019, edited