

August 29, 2010

Scripture: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Sermon: "Wedding Banquet"

We continue in the Gospel of Luke and we pick up where we ended last Sunday. We heard the good news last week that we are free and then this week, Jesus gives us a course on table manners. It seems like an odd combination but according to Luke's Gospel theology, a clear sign of living out God's Kingdom is the "acceptance [and recognition] of other's as equals by breaking bread together."

So in Luke's mind, the good news that we have been freed because God's Kingdom is happening now should be lived out around the table. Because we are freed, forgiven and loved as children of God, we are called to break bread together. We are called to practice acceptance. We are called to share God's love. We are called to practice Good Table Manners.

These Good Table Manners go beyond what our parents taught us. They go beyond which fork to use, go beyond "No elbows on the table", go beyond "Don't talk with our mouths full." These Good Table manners are the basic principles of God's Kingdom. They are grounded in the experience of love, hope, and grace that we first experienced when we heard the good news. They are invitations to do more, be more, and become the people that God created us to be. These Good Table manners are the keys to God's Kingdom. These Good Table manners are the keys to being a good guest. These good table manners are Luke's way of telling us that now we are free, it is time to be good guests here in God's Kingdom on earth.

But I'm sure the leadership of the synagogue would give a different example of how to be a good guest based on how Jesus has been acting or will act at the table in our story today. The leadership is already a little wary of Jesus. We heard the story last week of how he healed on the Sabbath. So they decide to keep an eye on him. And what better way to keep an eye on someone than to invite him or her to a meal. But I'm not sure the leaders of the synagogue had this in mind when they invite Jesus to dinner. As soon as he walks into the host's house, he begins to point out everyone's bad table manners and becomes that guest, you know, that guest that you regret inviting, you know that guest, that doesn't know how to behave in polite society, you know that guest that seems to keep life interesting, you know that guest does things or says things that will be talked about for years to come. You know that guest, that makes everyone just a little uncomfortable because he just doesn't or won't fit in.

So here they all are, coming in from church and Jesus notices that there is a mad rush for places of honor. And he says that is not that way it should be done, that one should sit at the lowest place and then wait for the host to invite you rather than going for the place of honor, because someone more important might come in and you will have to be asked to move and nothing could be more embarrassing than that.

And then he turns to the host and says that when giving a dinner, one should not invite family and friends but should invite the poor, the lame, the blind and the cripple, that when giving a dinner, one should not invite people who can return the favor, but invite people who will never be able to return the favor.

At this point in our Scripture, Jesus is in danger of becoming Emily Post all except that we as readers are given a clue. We hear that Jesus told the guests a parable. And immediately, our “Kingdom” antennas go up. We expect to hear that the Kingdom of God is like...but in this instance, that phrase is not said. But as Jesus continues, we realize that “what starts out...as a breach of etiquette for a number of guests ends up with a prediction about a radical change.” When Jesus reminds the guests to find the lowest place to sit, he is not giving them a new way to get a head or another empty way to appear humble. That would go against the very nature of God’s Kingdom. He is simply saying that the Kingdom of God is like a place of honor that is given to all regardless of social status, wealth, or education. The Kingdom of God is like a gift freely given, that cannot be earned, that cannot be bought. The Kingdom of God is like that first time we were all accepted for who we are, not because what we can do for others. And by taking the lowest place, through this very act, we remember and proclaim that as children of God, forgiven, loved and free, we share God’s grace with all of God’s children. The same grace that was first shared with us, the same grace that we can never repay, the same grace that was given as a gift, no strings attached. We didn’t earn this grace because of our titles, degrees, wealth, and position in life. We were given this grace simply because we are God’s Beloved.

And he drives this point home even farther, when he reminds us that the Kingdom of God is like a huge banquet that is filled with all of God’s children, regardless of the labels and boundaries that we use to keep others out. The Kingdom of God is like a fabulous dinner party that we were surprised when we realized that we were invited. The Kingdom of God is like an all you can eat buffet with all of God’s creation with free refills on drinks.

As Jesus tells this Kingdom parable, we realize that we are called to something more. We are reminded that now as children of God, forgiven, loved and freed, we are called to look at our lives, our relationships now through the lens of God’s Kingdom. Which means practicing our best table manners such as remembering that the last will be first and the first will be last, such as remembering that God’s table is opened for all of God’s children, such as remembering that because we have been freed and given the gift of God’s grace, we no longer need to define our self-worth by this world’s standards or places of honor.

We know that we have been given the highest place of honor at the most important, the most prestigious dinner party and that is a seat at God’s Table, a table that is full of God’s blessings, a table that is filled with other guests of honor simply because they are God’s beloved, a table that is filled with the richness of God’s feast.

And so when Jesus begins his etiquette advice with a parable, he is reminding us that the Kingdom of God calls us to more, calls us to live our lives differently, calls us to remember that we are free. He is reminding us that the Kingdom of God is based on our relationship with God and with all of God’s creation, including all of God’s children.

At the heart of Jesus’ etiquette advice, he is reminding us as children of God, forgiven, loved and freed that we can’t “separate these two – that is, [we] can’t claim much of a relationship with God if [our] relationship with the people around [us] stinks. [And] that works in reverse, too. As we see in today’s reading, precisely because we have been invited into relationship by God – because, that is, God has conferred upon us freely a dignity and worth we could never secure for

ourselves – we are free to do the same for others. We are free to put them before ourselves, to lead them to seats of honor, to invite them to be our dinner guests, not because of what they can do for us, but because of what has already been done for all of us.”

That’s the Good News. That’s the lesson of the parable. That’s the Gospel in a nutshell. We are free to practice good table manners, being gracious hosts, not just for our friends and family, but for all children of God because we have been greeted by The gracious host, God. We are free to practice good table manners by allowing others to have the seats of honor because we know that we have a sit of honor at the feast that means the most.

And we do this through the practice of hospitality. We do this through the practice of WELCOME. We do this not by simply sending food to the poor but inviting them to our tables. We do this not be simply acknowledging the injustices in our society but by being a voice for the voiceless. We do this not by simply having communion every Sunday but by believing in and practicing an open table in our church that welcomes all, no boundaries, no fences, no who’s in and who is out, no places that are better than others because all the places are places of honor. We practice good table manners by remembering it is the Lord’s Table that brings us together as people of faith. That this life-forming moment when Christ broke the bread and gave it to his disciples is for all people of God. That this most meaningful moment when Christ blessed the cup and gave it to his disciples is for all of God’s children.

And each and every time that we come together as the people of God, we remember Jesus’ death, a death that was not only for a few but a death that was for all of God’s children. By breaking bread together with all of God’s children, we remember that Jesus welcomed his disciples to the table that night, knowing that one would betray him to the Romans, that one would deny him three times, and that the rest of them would scatter. We remember that Jesus welcomed his disciples to the table that night to remember the Passover feast, to remember God’s saving acts in the past of God’s people. And we remember that Jesus welcomed his disciples to the table that night once more to show them that God was still working, that God was doing saving acts in the lives of God’s people, that God’s love was for all.

But most importantly, we remember that Jesus welcomed all of his disciples to the table that night. Jesus did not exclude anyone from his table. He welcomed all: sinners tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick, the lame, the wealthy, the poor, the righteous, and the stranger. And that is what the Kingdom of is God is like. And that is what Good Table Manners are supposed to be: the opportunity come to the table and say the words that are the most meaningful and the most life-forming for us as Christians. I am a child of God, forgiven, loved and freed. I am God’s Beloved.

May we always practice our best Table Manners here in God’s Kingdom on earth. Amen.