

Scripture Reading for August 31st

Luke 14:1, 7-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

14 On one occasion when Jesus^[a] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

Humility and Hospitality

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon: The Table is Set

Karen Percy

This morning’s gospel reading from Luke informs us that it was the Sabbath and Jesus was headed to the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees to share a meal with them. Mealtime with Jesus was often paired with a time of teaching. This time was no different. According to Luke, in the previous chapter, Jesus had performed a miracle on a woman who had been unable to stand straight for 18 years. I mention this to draw our attention to Luke’s words in the first verse, “they were watching him closely.” You see, in the verses that were not included in this morning’s reading, Jesus performed another miracle on the Sabbath. This time for a gentleman experiencing edema, a condition that occurs when fluid is trapped in the body.

Jesus' movements were being scrutinized by the Pharisees. His actions and his words about his God were of particular interest. Given this scrutiny, who in this story is showing humility of character and radical hospitality? Is it the host of this meal? Think about it, Jesus must have come across as a bit of a rebel, performing a miracle on the Sabbath, not once but twice. He posed questions of their character, the laws concerning the observance of the Sabbath – all of which were left unanswered. He was being a real thorn in their side. In one way, it is odd that Jesus was invited. Usually, when we experience people who we decide we do not like nor wish to be around it is unlikely that we would invite them to our table.

Or do we see Jesus as the one who was humble and showing radical hospitality? He was obviously frustrated by them and disagrees with the way that they see the observance of the Sabbath. He is intent on offering an alternate view of the Sabbath whether they were open to hearing his thoughts about it or not. If you were in this story as Jesus, an ordinary person, not as the son of God, would you willingly accept to share a meal at the person's house that you find yourself in disagreement with? Or would you walk very quickly, far, far away from this annoying person? I think it is safe to say that most of us would avoid sitting at this table with such a difficult person.

Jesus's actions are a bit bold and in your face. It reminds me of when someone tries to give you advice that you did not ask for. Have you ever found yourself minding your own business, doing your own thing when someone approaches you and says, "Do you know what you should do?" In those moments, many of us are silently saying a prayer, "God help us."

Because the Pharisees heard of him performing miracles on the Sabbath, it is no wonder, they were watching Jesus closely. They are trying to catch him in the act of saying or doing something inappropriate. Interestingly, the Pharisees did see him perform the second miracle for the gentleman with edema and yet Luke makes no reference of their reaction or if words were said to Jesus. It is clear the focal point of Luke's story is what happens at the table.

Despite Jesus' tactic of offering these unsolicited stories his heart was in the right place. He was attempting to teach and live by example that through the eyes and heart of God everyone is indeed invited at the table. In Jesus' day, seating arrangements showed a definite prestige or honour that a guest had. By using a hypothetical story and then changing the location from the home of a leader of the Pharisees, to that of a wedding feast, he is distancing himself from being seen as directly criticizing the guests' behaviour of seeking the best seat. Instead, the parable was used in a general sense to convey how the actions of who we invite or do not invite to the table are important.

Numerous times, Jesus offers teachings around a table. Feeding and nourishing our physical bodies as well as our souls. If you were to read the chapter of Luke, you would easily find at least ten different occasions of Jesus being connected with teaching at a mealtime. In this instance, Jesus is trying to teach us about embracing a lifestyle of humility and to move from being self-centred to that of being centred on others.

The parable that Jesus offers the group is that we are not only to seek our friends or the ones we like to join us at the table. Jesus is questioning the social system and invites us to seek out those who are not from the same social class as ourselves. We are to extend the invitation beyond our trusted family and friends.

Jesus is trying to urge us to be creators of justice and compassion by inviting others to the table. For at God's table, all are invited and there is no priority seating or VIP list to try to get on. So that means, even the neighbour who has the noisy leaf blower and grates on our very last nerve is to be invited to the table. You know that irritating family member, the one we silently hope to never have to speak to again, God's invitation to the table includes them as well. It also includes the one who has different political or theological views than us. Each one has a place at the table.

It is not always easy to extend the invite, is it? There are many reasons that prevent us from inviting others to our table. Sometimes it is because of a disagreement that has gone on for so long that we are simply holding a grudge. Other times, it is because of words that were said in anger. At times, it is due to shame or something else left unnamed that is holding us back from extending the invitation to another person. There are many valid reasons as to why we do not entertain others at our table. When our safety is a concern or has been previously threatened asking just anybody at the table is not easy nor safe to do. Sometimes grief plays a part in creating distance from the table. In my own experience, when my dad died many moons ago, a family member on his side was unable to continue to host my mom, my sister and myself at their table. Their refusal to do so had a profound impact on our family traditions. As time went on, I often wondered how different our relationship would have been if they had continued to invite us to their table after dad's death. Would it have made the grief any less obvious? Of course not. What it could have done though was open us to a moment of shared grief, a shared experience. One where stories could have been shared and through it all we would have learned what it means to grieve together and still find joy within this grief.

September is just around the corner and is often felt as a time of new beginnings or reprising of certain activities and commitments. As we prepare to start anew, draw in your mind's eye, a table set before you, a table ready to greet guests, with many chairs, maybe having place card holders with names on them, it could be set for a communal meal or for a community meeting. You add the details that are important to you. Now let us consider who are we forgetting, who are we avoiding or not wanting to invite to our table? Are we ready to add one more chair?

We as members of The United Church of Canada believe in the concept of an open table. Our sacrament of communion and the words used during this symbolic meal invites all who seek to love Jesus to participate, to open ourselves to be alert to the sacred in the midst of life. Our faith statement, A Song of Faith (2006) states that we "taste the mystery of God's great love for us and are renewed in faith and in hope." There are no barriers as to who can receive God's grace if they so choose. So, who would you choose to invite to our table?

The song we listened to earlier, "For Everyone Born, A Place at the Table" captures beautifully the essence of this parable. The table is set, the chalice of grace for all is ready to be shared. All are invited. As we prepare to leave this place, may these words of the song remain with us as we consider who we can invite to the table, "And God will delight when we are creators of justice, of joy, compassion and peace. Yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice, justice and joy." With these words as our guide, let us go, creating justice and compassion, invite the one who is missing from our table. The table is ready; the table is set, ready to welcome all who join. For everyone born there is a place at the table. Amen.