

**“The Manners We Learn from Our Tables”**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Aug 28, 2022 – Luke 14:1, 7-14/C**

Think about how simple things have shaped your life. I’m not talking about modern day conveniences - like washing machines and the internet - I’m talking about things like clotheslines and shovels. Things that if you need and don’t have you could probably do the job without, but if you have, then your clothes smell like fresh air and your garden is much easier to tend. Here’s another thing: pockets. Did you know that pockets became part of clothing about the time Luther was nailing his 95 Theses on the Castle Door? At least, for men. Women carried what they needed in pouches tied around their waist under their garments - such that they could not retrieve anything in public - which severely limited their ability to carry notes or money or anything of value that might be needed outside their home. But then, what could a woman need that was of the same value as a man? He had pockets in his trousers, a watch pocket, and inside coat pocket and later, even a shirt pocket for his necessities. I tell you this only to make the point about how little things you might never think about can influence how you live your life - simple things can shape identity.

Today’s story got me thinking past pockets and on to tables. I remember where I always sat at the kitchen table in the house where I grew up in. My seat never changed until I had my own home, and chose my own table. But what I find really curious is how the *shape* of tables today affects those seated around it. If the primary dining table is round or square, wouldn’t that make it feel as if all who are seated there are equally welcome and valued? But what about a rectangular or oval table? These almost require a head and a foot. Do the others sit there solely as guests of the “host” of the meal or the master of the house? Even a counter usually has a server and the ones served. Another example of how simple things can shape identity.

It seems like this summer has brought nothing but change - lots of simple things changing that are shaping our identity: empty nests, death of loved ones, sicknesses and aging, leaders changing roles. At times like this we might feel as if we are never going to regain our balance - our “who we used to be”. But this might be precisely when our Christian faith can be the simple wellspring that can dissolve whatever we fear might overwhelm us. For it is times like these, when we can also discover some new paths, some new leadership, some new ways to be. We can take stock and assess our lives as we are living them right now. We can decide if this is how we would like to live, and if the path we are on is truly the way we want to go. Then, we can take some time to count our blessings, and make whatever course corrections seem pleasing to us and to God.

Jesus took these times of transition in his own life to share the simple things he had learned about being human, and he used stories he knew from Scripture and images of common, shared life in his time. And while we are **not** fishermen, farm workers nor Pharisees; **not** shepherds, Centurions nor scribes; we do know about the basic struggle to get ahead and provide for our families. We do know how the corporate games are played and we know that our form of government affects us - whether it be a dictatorship, a monarchy or a republic. Thus, it is our task when we read Scripture, to listen for the connections. What might Jesus be saying to them that also applies to us in this place and this time and in our situations and experience?

First of all, the story is not really about Table Manners and Ancient Etiquette - but it does show us about their social structures and how seating at dinner could influence

behavior. They were occupied by a foreign government, and were making some critical assessments about how they would live out their faith in a changing world. Jesus was using all of his last days to share his message of God's love and mercy in very personal and pointed ways.

Historically, this culture was rooted in shame and honor. Nothing was done without weighing the consequences of ones' decisions. Asking, "Will this action, choice or passion bring about shame or honor to me and to my family?" was a mindset that had deep roots - especially in Middle Eastern cultures - and even here, in our day. Our early upbringing in our traditions made it clear that God was Judge, and has only in recent generations reconsidered God in terms of grace, mercy and love. The ongoing evidence that shame and honor influence us is still present, even at our tables. Yep. Assigned seating at a table brings order - and it is linked to status. No question. Because "*If people eat in the wrong place (or sit in my pew, heaven forbid) no telling what else will fall apart.*" Those of you here who have a bit of grey at your temples will recall what happened when someone sat down at the wrong lunch counters or took their seat on the wrong buses of the 1960's during the height of the Civil Rights movement.

Seating is important. Just ask any student starting classes in new school. I remember a Verizon ad that aired some time back - Big Sister is advising Little Brother on the ins and outs of his new school. Obviously, she'd been there before, so shares hints on teachers, prep for classes, what not to eat in the cafeteria and this sage advice about seating at lunch: "*Where you sit can define your entire year.*"

Yep. Seating at a table is linked to status. No question. But Jesus wants to make it less about status and posturing and more about the fellowship of us who already HAVE the seats around the table. Jesus is teaching us about the timeless possibilities for the use of our power, position and privilege. Because while we can bring shame upon *ourselves*; honor is bestowed only *by another*. In this case, honor is bestowed by the host - and our place at the table is provided as undeserved and gracious gift. (Who "will sit at his right and his left hand in the Kingdom" is known only to the Father.) And even when we do not deserve it, Jesus calls us "friends."

Finally, How, then, do we decide how to live, those of us who already have great seats wherever we go? Well, take a look at our second lesson from the book of Hebrews. "*Do not neglect to do good. Share what you have. Let mutual love continue...for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*" Dr. Roy McClain, former pastor of Atlanta's First Baptist Church, once said that 99% of whatever we do to love God, we do to other people. God does not (he said) need our money or our time or even our compassion. But people do. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it, too, when he dreamed his dream 60 years ago.

So, to whom have we given our places at the table? Who has received a welcome so that they would not be kept apart from the Kingdom of God? Who has received a seat at the banquet because of your invitation? In the past 33 years, I have seen you do that over and over again, with others who needed a loving gesture, a place to sit, an open heart to receive a prayer from someone who just wanted to extend their blessing to you. And why have you done these things? Why have you surrendered even a tiny bit of your position to someone else?

You didn't do it because it made you feel better (which it did...) You didn't do it because it was the right thing to do (which it was...) You did it because the foundation of

God's church is built not on judgment and power but on forgiveness and the honoring of every child of God.

Thinking that mercy might be undeserved? Well, you'd be right. For that is the definition of Grace – and that is why we are not ashamed to live out our calling to serve all people. It is the simplest and greatest piece of our identity as children of God. For there is No Status at this table (*pointing to the altar*) for we are all welcome here. Here we all receive from the center – from the host – who gives up his own body, his blood so that we might receive **his honor** as our own.

So, when you come forward to Christ's Table this morning, bring someone with you in your heart, all those who you know, and even those you haven't met – who just need someone to step back and give them a place to belong – a place where they might experience the Kingdom of God – where they are loved, where they will be fed, and where they already belong. It's a simple idea. And it's who we are. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser  
Advent Lutheran Church  
Olathe, Kansas

**Resources:** Dr. Lauren Winner at *Festival of Homiletics, Nashville, May 2013*; quoted by Rev. Dr. Sam Matthews – First UMC on *Day One*; Brian Stoffregen's *Crossmarks*; William Loader's *First Thoughts*; "A Place at the Table" 8/28/16; "Trust Your Host" – 9/1/13; "Know Your Place, Wait Your Turn" - 9/2/07