



Rev. Tara Woodard-Lehman - 9.01.19

"Mealttime"

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Our scripture lesson comes to us this morning from Luke's Gospel, the 14th chapter. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

Luke 14:1 On one occasion, when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

"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; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

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 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. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Friends this is the Word of the Lord, **Thanks be to God!**

Prayer:

Holy and Loving God, You are our Bread of Life. Nourish us with your Word today, that in our hearing, we may leave this place better able to love your world. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

One of the things I most enjoy in this world is sharing stories and food around a table.

Don't get me wrong. The table can be a rowdy place full of noise, chaos, bickering, spills, and laughter. At least that's how it is with my family, at our table. But as we

set down our devices, and set aside our distractions, it can also be a place of meaningful connection.

Our table is never Instagram #perfect. But it doesn't *have* to be. Because mealtime isn't about running a tidy, manicured, conflict-free, program. Mealtime is about being fed in body and in spirit; it's about being nourished through the company we share, as much as the food we eat.

When our family first moved to New Zealand, we needed a time of nourishment and connection, more than ever before. Dizzy with culture shock, we longed for an anchor; a physical place that tethered us in the midst of all the transition and change. Our dining room table became that place.

At the table we shared food. But we also shared prayers, jokes, fears, stories, and dreams.

One of the most meaningful things we did at the table was an evening "check-in time" that we called "Nopes, Dopes, and Hopes." For our "nopes" we shared what was hard about the day; things that left us sad, angry, confused, or afraid. For our "dopes" we shared what was great about the day; things that left us happy, rested, relieved, or connected. For our "hopes" we shared what we looked forward to in the day to come.

Our "Nopes, Dopes, and Hopes" ritual was a precious time for us. It was a reminder that we can experience very *holy* moments, in very *ordinary* places. It was a reminder that being a follower of Jesus means we're a people of the table. And it's at the table, we encounter the Bread of Life.

You know that hungry neighbor kid, who just *happens* to pop in *right* when dinner is being served? (Maybe you were, or are, that kid?) Well, I think that's sort of how God is. God in Christ has a long track record of always showing up, sometimes unannounced, during mealtime.

We see this *throughout* God's Story; in gardens and in cities; in grassy fields and in dry deserts; on lakeshores and in homes.

God works in and through the breaking of bread in a lot of Scripture, with a lot of different people, in a lot of different places. And the place it seems to happen most often, is at the table.

We see this clearly in today's gospel.

For the writer of the gospel of Luke the table is *central*. In his book, *Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel* author Robert Karris says, "In Luke... Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."

Maybe you recall some of those meals:

- Like the many meals Jesus eats with those he isn't "supposed" to; like tax collectors, sinners, and women with bad reputations.
- Or the times the *meals* themselves became the *miracles*. Like the feeding of the 5,000, and (my personal favorite) when Jesus turns water into wine.
- And then there's the meal we're probably most familiar with; the meal on the night Jesus was betrayed. Remember?

Jesus and his disciples were sharing the Passover meal. After giving thanks for the bread Jesus broke it and told the disciples, "This is my body, broken for you, whenever you eat of it, remember me."

It was at *that* meal, during what we now refer to as "the Last Supper," Jesus describes the mystery of his dying and his rising. Jesus does this not by presenting them with a sophisticated theological doctrine, or a slick TEDtalk presentation, or even a clever three point sermon.

Jesus describes the mystery of his death and resurrection, by simply giving them *food*.

- Even *after* his death and resurrection, Jesus shows up at tables.

In one story, he talks with some of his followers who don't *recognize* him. But in the breaking of bread, we're told their eyes were opened, and they could see Christ in their midst. In another story we're told the Risen Christ eats food just to prove he's not a ghost!

Clearly, in Luke's gospel, mealtime is very important. So it should come as no surprise that in today's passage, we find ourselves yet *again*, at a table.

Today's story opens with Jesus having a meal with some religious leaders. Because of his past record, these leaders are already a little suspicious of Jesus. As verse one tells us, they were "watching him closely" as he begins to speak.

But before anyone can exchange the usual mealtime pleasantries Jesus cuts to the chase and launches into a lecture about *manners*.

Manners? Yes, *manners*.

But not “manners,” in the oftentimes trivial sense of Emily Post and the politeness police. Jesus isn’t worried if everyone is prim and proper. Jesus isn’t checking whether or not a pinky is raised at just the right angle when drinking tea. Jesus isn’t the schoolmarm of respectability.

Jesus isn’t even describing “manners” in the *important* sense of *politeness* -- as *gratitude* and *respect*. Yes, it’s important to say “please” and “thank you” when passing plates around the table. Yes, it’s good and right to *thank* someone who takes the time to make your supper with love and care. But in today’s passage, Jesus isn’t the hall monitor of courtesy.

The “manners” Jesus has in mind, actually go to the *heart* of the gospel. These manners are not about how we eat at the table: napkins on our lap, pinkies up, salad fork first. These manners—*Kingdom* manners—are about who we meet at the table.

Catch that? In this Story, Jesus is less concerned with how we eat, than who we meet.

Jesus *starts* by reminding guests not to look for the best seat in the house. He says that we shouldn’t try to sit next to the most popular, most attractive, or most powerful person at the table.

But then, Jesus shifts the conversation, and talks about who should be on the guestlist.

Jesus says that as *hosts*, we shouldn’t invite our dearest friends, closest family, or richest acquaintances. He says we shouldn’t try to curry favor, or invite others in order to somehow get paid back in return.

In today’s passage, we see, the “manners” of God’s kingdom are not the same as the manners of *this* world. They are not quid pro quo.

The manners of the Kingdom are the last shall be first. The lowly will be exalted, and the mighty will be laid low. The manners of the Kingdom shatter class-based dining etiquette. They violate (both ancient, and modern senses of) protocol and propriety. Not because Jesus is an anti-establishment rebel without a cause; some punk who just wants to stick it to the man.

The manners of the Kingdom turn things upside down because Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. He came to call his followers friends, not slaves. He came to seek the last and the lost, and to welcome them in.

The manners of the Kingdom function on a different level, in a different economy, and they point to a different, better, *fuller* way of being human.

The manners of the Kingdom confront our obsessions with rugged individualism; they curtail our cravings for status and power; they reveal the face of Jesus in strangers and enemies; and they invite us to be more connected and whole.

The manners of God's upside-down Kingdom *turn* the tables on who deserves welcome, who is worthy of respect, and who we are called to make room for.

Friends, God's table is big. There's room for *all* of us. We don't need to elbow our way in or push others aside to find a seat. Jesus is our *Host*, and he invites *everyone*.

Regardless of status or education or rank or likeability. Jesus invites us, regardless of who we are, where we come from, or how badly we've behaved. Jesus puts us on the guestlist, knowing full well we could never pay him back.

Truth is, we all come to God's Table by *grace*. We don't come because we somehow *deserve* it. We don't come because we've somehow *earned* it. We don't come because we somehow believe the right doctrines or practice the right rituals. We come only and always because of GRACE. THIS is what this whole Jesus business is all about. This is why we gather for worship week after week. Not because we are *worthy*, but because we are *hungry*.

Are you hungry? Are you hungry for something more? Something deeper? Something truer? Are you hungry for a more just world? Are you hungry to better love and serve your neighbors when they are broken and hurting?

Are you hungry for a more meaningful connection with those sitting in the pews around you? Are you hungry for more intimacy with God? Are you *spiritually* hungry?

I hope so. Because that means you're paying attention. It means you're "tuned in" to the heart of God. It means you're aware of your *deepest* cravings: The craving for God in Christ to be made real in our everyday lives. The craving for the One who feeds us body and spirit, so we may go out and feed others.

You know, at this point in the sermon many preachers will charge their congregations to go and invite others to church. And that's all well and good. We'd love to have more folks come and be with us as we learn what it means to follow Jesus in this broken world.

But today, I want to send you with *another* challenge. Before you invite someone to church, why don't you simply do this: Invite them to a *meal*. Invite someone who can't pay you back. Invite someone who can't advance your social standing or do you any favors. If you're brave enough, maybe invite someone who could tarnish your reputation. Invite the poor, the sick, the lost, the left out, and the loner. Invite others, and expect *nothing* in return. Invite others, as Christ invites us.

As you do, remember that we are all invited, along with saints from every time and every place to come to God's Table, no strings attached. Amen