

Sirach 10:12-18-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Year C, Proper 17 2025

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Christ Episcopal Church Sparta, NC
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Table Talk

Today's gospel lesson might elicit no more than a polite yawn from us if we we're honest. Jesus comes off in this scene as a sort of progressive Miss Manners. I like the fact that Jesus is concerned with our table etiquette, but what's so important about what we do ^{at dinner} and where we sit to eat?

For two of the three years I was in seminary I lived in an apartment with 2 other women students. The apartments were old and in ours the original dining room had been converted into a bedroom. We had one bathroom, a small living room and a sunroom in the front of the apartment which we used as a dining room. My first year in the apartment I lived with Maryann who was from Connecticut. She was vegan, but on occasion she would eat fish. Her preference was veggies and Tofu. She rolled her own cigarettes and went to bed at 8 and got up at 3am to study each day. The other woman, Ann, was from Albany, GA. Growing up, Ann's family had a cook. Ann did not like vegetables, fish, rice or anything boiled. Needless to say, Tofu had not been a part of her dining experience. Ann had been a preschool teacher - she liked to explain things... ^{As for me,} I don't think I was too choosy about food in those days; I was operating out of a very small budget. ^{I grew up in ~~South~~ Mt. S of NC + Ga} Tofu was not on my top 10 favorite foods and I certainly had my own quirks. We all got our own breakfast and lunch, but we ate dinner together. We took turns cooking which made things interesting. Maryann made bread every Saturday and so we always had bread from those delicious loaves. When she cooked it was often a stir fry, vegetables with rice or for protein, Tofu. I liked to make soup and since Maryann was vegan it was usually vegetable. You can see where I'm heading here. Ann's "cooking" was grilled cheese and potato chips, or sometimes tomato soup. After a few weeks of

and since Ann had no exp. cooking

grilled cheese “we” decided that Maryann and I would do the menus and cooking. Dinner time took on a whole new meaning that year. Ann and I learned to eat Tofu - notice I did not say, like Tofu. The first time I made cheese garlic grits and pinto beans, both Ann and Maryann looked a little pale. They were brave, although they did have two slices of bread with their meal. The most important thing however was that no matter how irritating some of the food was for all of us, we kept coming to the table. Having so little in common meant we had to work on being together. I guess we could have just fixed our meals and gone to our rooms to eat. There were a few tough times when one or all of us did that. Our places at that table, however, were important. It was not only the place where we said grace before we ate, it became the place where we learned in a new way to extend grace and to learn humility.

The Methodist preacher, Fred Craddock points out that for the gospel writer Luke, there is “nothing more serious than a dining table.” In Luke chapter 24, just after the resurrection, two of the disciples are walking along the Emmaus Road and a stranger joins them. Filling this stranger in on the events of the crucifixion and Jesus’ miraculous resurrection, they eventually come to a village. The stranger tries to walk on, but Cleopas and the other disciple invite him to eat with them. ~~As the~~ ^{It is when the} stranger breaks bread at their table, they recognize that he is Jesus.

In middle eastern culture table fellowship, inviting others to join in a meal, meant full acceptance of the other. Jesus dined with his disciples and with women who traveled with him. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, and with the officials of the Synagogue as well as Pharisees. Jesus was more than inclusive in the diversity of his companions at his table.

Jesus begins his parable by teaching about table manners. ***“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...***

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.” Social status was based on the seating chart for guests. I can see Jesus standing at the door to the banquet, saying, *“Skip the chart, take the seats at the lower end of the table, away from the head table. Maybe the host will come in and tell you to move up higher.”* If you humble yourselves, you’ll be exalted and if you exalt yourself, you’ll be humbled. It’s antithetical to how the world teaches us to be. We learn from the start of our school days to highlight our strengths, talk about how accomplished we are, name our awards. Get to know the important people. We need to make ourselves stand out among all the others competing for whatever we want. Jesus flips the script saying that we should, instead, find the lower seats; practice humility. .Try that Tofu, ^{or turnip greens} you might like it. But humility is not just for the guest. It’s for the host too. When you give a luncheon or dinner, don’t just invite those who can pay you back, those whose manners and dress are impeccable, Instead invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Then, says Jesus, you will be blessed. Invite people who don’t have any social status, who can’t help you get connected to the influential, those who cannot pay us back. This is the inversion of hospitality in ^{Principle of the Gospel} which those on the margins are placed front and center to remind us that a community is only as strong as its weakest member. Here is the upside down nature of the the KOG which is always surprising us. In God’s Kingdom, everyone comes to the table, there are no strings attached. No stipulations. ^{I don't mean need, scooting over to make room}

Hospitality in God’s Kingdom is about “creating space.” It is readjusting our perception of “who we are” ^{enlarging our boundaries to give room for others.} to make space for the other. It is not to change people into people like us, but to offer them a place as they are. Only then can they become the person God wants them to be.

Having the other at the table is not just a nice thing to do. It is the right thing to do. Having people around the table who ^{the person who is diff} don’t look like us, act like us, talk like

us, think like us, eat like we do, sing like us, dance like us...helps us understand the beauty of God a bit better. Jesus is an equal opportunity God. He does not exclude eating with the officials..the Pharisees, in order to eat with sinners and other outcasts. He invites them all together. Jesus' love for the other, the poor does not mean he has to hate someone else.

I will admit that this is the hard part for me. I'm angry with that Pharisee for being so privileged, so dismissive of others. This it seems to me is the hard work of the hospitality of the the KOG. Radical hospitality risks having to eat at the same table with someone who has on a MAGA red cap, or someone from the ACLU, or someone who grew up north of the Mason Dixon line who thinks I'm a racist because I grew up in NC. It risks having to get to know that person, eating a little Tofu, having my pinto beans and grits rebuffed. Most of all it means learning that it's not my hospitality at all. It's all about God's gracious, lavish, over the top invitation to all of us to share in the KOG.

Hospitality is at the heart of the gospel. God's idea of welcoming others includes everyone. There are no quotas, no need to worry that we might be turned away because we are different or that our sins and offenses are weighty. We are just who God is looking for to fill the table at this meal and eventually, one day at the heavenly banquet. Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Martha A. Honaker on September 31, 2025 at Christ Episcopal Church in Sparta, NC