

## **Breaking Bread**

*by The Rev. Dr. Randall Bush, Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church*

*Luke 14:1, 7-14*

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As long as there have been meals served, there have been rules about how we should behave at these meals – table manners and rules of dining etiquette. Some of the oldest written rules date back to 2500 BC, found on an ancient Egyptian papyrus called “Instructions to Ptahhotep.” It says that if you’re dining with your superior, you should “let thy mind be deep and thy speech scanty;” and remember to “laugh when he laughs.” In Western Europe during the Middle Ages, books describing codes of etiquette were very popular. Some writers warned it was a serious offense to gnaw a bone and then put it back in the dish, and it was a very bad habit to pick your teeth with your knife.

Another popular book on table manners was written in 1530 by the Dutch philosopher Erasmus. It offered some quaint advice aimed at children. For example, “If you cannot swallow a piece of food, turn round discreetly and throw it somewhere.” “You should not offer your handkerchief to anyone unless it has been freshly washed. Nor is it seemly, after wiping your nose, to peer into your handkerchief as if pearls and rubies might have fallen out of your head.” It’s surprising how much of that advice is still applicable today.<sup>1</sup>

The best-known American expert on proper etiquette has been Emily Post, whose Blue Book of Social Usage was first published in 1922. In one section on how to plan the perfect social party, she offered this warning: “The hostess who gathers in all the oddly assorted frumps on the outskirts of society cannot expect to achieve a very distinguished result.”<sup>2</sup> I’m not entirely sure what an “assorted frump” is, but it seems clear that Miss Post’s advice contradicts Jesus’ advice as recorded in Luke 14.

In our gospel passage for today, Jesus tells two brief parables. If invited to a special banquet, don’t take the place of honor, in case you have to move out of that spot when someone more distinguished arrives; rather take a lowly place so that the host might invite you to move up higher. And if you’re hosting a banquet, don’t limit your guest list to those whom you know will repay the favor; rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and outcast, for in doing so you will earn your reward in heaven. Jesus’ words are straightforward, easily understood, and still applicable today.

But don’t overlook the first verse, which describes the setting in which Jesus told these parables. “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” (Lk 14:1). Jesus not only ate with his disciples, with tax collectors and sinners; he also ate with the folks at the other end of the social spectrum. To be invited to dine with the leading Pharisees, Jesus had to have been seen as a fellow keeper of the Torah. Remember the central plotline of the gospel: Jesus wasn’t betrayed and rejected by outsiders; his greatest conflicts came from those close at hand, who knew he kept the law but also

saw how he radically reinterpreted the law and established new rules of social, spiritual etiquette.

At this meal, Jesus was being watched closely; so he returned the favor. He noticed how people jockeyed for position, seeking out the places of honor. Back then, you wanted to be reclined near the host, near the head of the table, near the place where the best food and largest portions would be placed; not stuck at the foot of the table, seated below the other guests, having to reach for all the bowls and platters of food. We feel the same way today. At the theatre, we want good seats near the stage, not back row spots with an obstructed view. On airplanes, we want comfortable seats close to exits when its time to go, and not the awful seats in the back that don't recline and are right next to the restrooms. At wedding receptions, we want a table near the bridal party up front, not stuck at Table 37 somewhere in the back corner of the hall.

At the meal Jesus attended, he saw people breaking all sorts of social and spiritual etiquette rules. A true story is told about a woman who went to her favorite bakery, only to find the area in front of the display counters crowded with people. She called out to one of the apron-clad workers behind the cash register: "Do I have to take a number? I don't see any." To which the clerk replied, "No, we are on the honor system in this store." "Good," the woman yelled; "Then I'm next."<sup>3</sup>

Etiquette and faith rules are routinely broken. We behave badly in our life together in communities. That's what we were warned about in the Hebrew scripture reading. Jeremiah took the elders and priests outside the city walls to the place where people threw their trash. There was so much broken pottery laying around that the gate that led to it was called the "Potsherd Gate." There amid the cracked plates and rubbish, Jeremiah smashed another ceramic jug, saying in effect, your spiritual lives are in pieces and they will remain so unless you return to worship the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

Centuries later, when Jesus sat at table with influential city leaders, his words had the effect of shattering a pot in their midst. His simple parables turned upside-down all the etiquette rules that were ordering their lives and faith practices. He said, You show hospitality to others – that is good; but don't do so only to those who can repay you. What credit is that to you if you only do good to those who can do good in return? Don't immediately grab the places of honor. Remember to show hospitality to the poor, the forgotten, the elderly, and the lonely. (Cf. Luke 6:32-36)

There are two levels to what Jesus said to the Pharisees and says to us today. There is the practical, honest truth that who we eat with and how we break bread together reveals an awful lot about who we are as persons claiming to serve a crucified, resurrected Savior. We eat more than a 1000 meals each year, over 360 between now and the New Year. The menus may vary, but we'll abide by certain rules of etiquette: Use silverware, not your fingers. Don't feed the dog at the dinner table. Don't make your sister laugh while she's drinking a glass of milk. We'll eat in pretty much the same locations, mostly at home, sometimes out at restaurants, fast-food places, or (sadly) at

our desk or in the car. And frankly whom we eat with likely won't vary too much in the course of a year: family, friends, co-workers, classmates.

But you and I both know that meals are always more than just occasions for consuming food. Meals can be times of celebration, times where new relationships begin or old relationships are deepened and healed. So Jesus asks us practical advice for mealtime: Who have you invited to break bread with you and who is excluded from your table? In effect he asks "What is the spirit behind your meals?" Doris Donnelly has said, "To live without food is not only to deprive the body of essential nourishment; it is also to deprive the spirit of its need for relationship. Therefore, to live without food is to die twice."<sup>4</sup>

On one level, Jesus asks about the spirit and spiritual character that are present when we sit down at a meal. But there's a deeper, richer meaning to Jesus' etiquette rules for mealtime. What is repeated every time we celebrate communion? The words of institution, in which Jesus says, "This is my body, broken for you." Now, historically the Christian church has taken those words as referring to the bread itself – Jesus' body as the bread broken and shared at communion, understood in different ways if you're Catholic or Lutheran or Presbyterian. But what if Jesus wasn't linking his body just with the bread itself – in some sort of one-to-one correspondence - but rather was linking his being with the act of breaking bread. Saying, 'This is how I've been incarnated and made known to you, in the action of being broken, of giving myself sacrificially for others – healing, weeping, washing disciples feet, carrying a cross and then crucified on a cross. I am not a static thing, a noun amongst other nouns. I am a verb, an action, an incarnation of love and will and grace. And if you want to see me, look for me where something is broken. Where bread is shared, resources are made available to all. Look for me around the table, for in those fed, loved, common faces, I will be most visibly present.'<sup>5</sup>

That may sound a little different from how you normally think of Jesus' presence at the communion meal, but remember how this gospel ends. Luke's gospel concludes with the story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus – the two believers who invite him to stay with them and who recognize Jesus (When?) as he literally breaks bread.

Jesus' parables on spiritual etiquette are practical and worth putting into practice. And just as the sacred and holy is always right at your fingertips, remember that in the breaking of bread, Jesus is most visible. Whom you eat with and how you share that bread will determine just how visible.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> The previous etiquette references all come from a 1987 book called Panati's Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things by Charles Panati.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness*, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times, "Metropolitan Diary," January 24, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peter Lampe, *Interpretation*, January 1994, p. 43.