

THE WELCOME TABLE

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Kelly B. Brill
Avon Lake UCC
7 September 2014

A group of psychologists conducted an experiment with 150 people on a weekend retreat. They told everyone to move into 8 breakout rooms with no more than 20 people in each group. Those were the only directions given. Everyone reacted with great anxiety to the directions. People quickly moved into rooms, elected or appointed a leader, counted out to make sure they had no more than 20, and then shut the doors of the breakout rooms to close anyone else out. They did this even though no one told them to elect leaders or shut the doors. Later in the weekend, the psychologists helped the participants reflect on the experience and notice how quickly it can happen that we develop a herd mentality, dividing ourselves into insiders and outsiders. History is full of examples of times when human beings have shown great compassion to those who are in their group and shown incredible cruelty to those considered outsiders. We don't have to look very far into current events, or very far out of our own neighborhoods, to see the same phenomenon. Whether it comes naturally, or whether it's something we learn, the fact is that excluding others is common behavior.

It was true in Jesus' time as well. The Pharisees were a group especially interested in maintaining a strict observance of the law. As we read through the gospels, we see that Jesus and the Pharisees frequently clashed. They're watching him closely, because they're suspicious that he's promoting the wrong kind of religious practice. Jesus isn't interested in the letter of the law, or the law for the sake of the law.

Jesus promotes, and lives, the law of love. If the law contributes towards greater love of God and neighbor, then that's a law Jesus will follow. If it doesn't, he will easily discard it. But the Pharisees act like the law police; they're always watching Jesus and seem to almost relish in catching him doing something wrong, making a mistake.

They have an adversarial relationship, Jesus and the Pharisees, yet they have a relationship. Our story for today begins with these words: "Jesus was going to the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees to share in the Sabbath meal." Right there is a lesson. Jesus remains in relationship with those people with whom he vehemently disagrees. Perhaps Jesus knows that the only chance he has of changing hearts and minds is if he stays close. Perhaps he knows that he can't preach about welcome and acceptance and inclusion if he doesn't practice it, especially with people he finds most difficult to like. It's hard to stay in community with people who share very different beliefs and values, but I wonder if we're too quick sometimes to divide ourselves into camps, and entrench ourselves into those camps. Other than Thanksgiving dinner when your vegan tattooed niece is forced to make nice conversation with your gun-toting brother-in-law, how often do we sit at the table with those with whom we strongly disagree? Would we be a stronger union if those who watch Fox news and those who watch MSNBC had to eat at the same lunch table once a week, and really listen to one another?

The table is the place of grace in many of Jesus' stories. It is around the table where we see one another eye to eye, where we acknowledge our common humanity, where some of our differences begin to fade.

So Jesus tells story after story about banquets, wedding feasts, dinner parties...he calls us to imagine the miracles that could occur if all the world's people could actually sit down at a table together. He asks us to be extravagant hosts. "When you give a banquet," he says, "Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." When we invite others to our tables, we will know what it means to embrace and embody hospitality.

But I think something has to happen before we can be that kind of a host. Before we can throw parties of extravagant welcome, we need to be the guest at that kind of table. Before we can extend an invitation, we need to realize that we, ourselves, have been invited to the table of grace. We need to know what it feels like to sit at the table with Christ as the host. This is a question I invite you to sit with, and take with you this week as you pray and think, as you drive and walk: "Do I believe that God accepts me, loves me unconditionally, and forgives me?" I talk to so many people who say to me, "I may look like a good person on the outside, but I'm really not." Or they say to me, "I feel like a fraud. I'm not really the person others think I am." We feel unworthy, ashamed; we carry those feelings and thoughts around with us and they keep us from the joy of the table; we may eat, but the food just doesn't taste good. The first step is accepting God's grace and love. And when you feel that, you will be so grateful for it, you will want to share with others. It will be a natural response.

For most of us, realizing God has accepted us doesn't just happen once. It's a process we enter again and again. It's why we have a prayer of confession once a month, on communion Sundays. We need to come clean and we need to remember that we are forgiven.

And from that place of forgiveness, we are then challenged. Who do you need to invite to your table? Who do we need to invite in to this church? Who are the people in our communities, in our circle of acquaintances, who most need to taste the bread of welcome, the cup of acceptance? Are there parents whose special need children have been made fun of? Are there people who have recently moved into your neighborhood and haven't made friends yet? Do you know someone who's recently lost a job, or a relationship? Do you have a coworker who's living with a mental or physical illness, or who's alone in caring for an elderly relative? What about the single parents you know who would benefit from the support of a church family? Who needs the welcome table?

Martin Luther King once said, "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." Hospitality is not drudgery, this is not work that drains us; this is work that energizes us. Building the beloved community is the best antidote there is to the dreary news of the world. We're not naive; we know that we live in a world with serious problems and divisions. Yet we also know that the only way we can make a difference is within our own sphere of influence. Practicing hospitality, breaking down barriers, makes a difference, creates a ripple, and draws us closer to God.

As we come to the table today, let us come knowing that we are invited by the God who knows all about us and loves us anyway. As we open our hearts to those God has invited, we will see the face of Christ in one another.