

God's Seating Plan is a Circle

Sermon on Luke 14:1,7-23

Sunday August 29, 2010

Trinity United Ottawa

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How many of us have ever had a hand in preparing the seating plan for a banquet? Perhaps a wedding supper or a conference banquet for work, a charitable dinner, or even a large formal dinner party?

I think lots of us have an immediate association with the challenges facing the hosts of Jesus' three banquet stories in the Book of Luke. Its not simple to fit everyone in correctly, is it? It's a painstaking challenge to get the social order right. Not to offend. Not to leave anyone out. Deciding who needs to be recognized and who should be at the head table. And how many can we afford to invite?

And how many of us have attended such formal events? Were you ever unsure of where to sit or unhappy with where you were placed? If you were given a prestigious seat, was it comfortable for you, up there at the head table? Or maybe you felt hurt or affronted, finding yourself at the back with the riffraff, near the kids' table?

Our place at a formal banquet table says a lot about our social status. (Of course, not being invited at all, speaks volumes too!) In Jesus' day it meant even more. In the Judaism of his time, who sat at the table and where, really defined people's lives. There were a lot of religious rules about social meals. And wedding banquets were really *the* community gatherings of the year. As a peasant in a two class society where people were either rich or poor, Jesus was sensitized to who got to the feast - and who didn't even get to eat.

It is no mistake that our central Christian ritual is Communion - eating together as a symbol of being One in Christ community. In early Christianity, eating Communion together was even more important to belonging than Baptism. The dominant theme of Jesus' whole ministry is summed up in 'radical commensality.' Eating all

together was his central metaphor, as well as the defining practice that enacted his vision - the Kingdom of heaven on earth. And every time he sat down he seemed to be breaking with Hebrew custom, ignoring the purity laws by including odd meal companions. Overturning the status quo. In so many stories, he seemed to be telling us that God's seating plan is *different*. God's seating plan is a circle.

In the first of the three banquet stories, Luke has Jesus advising his fellow Pharisees at dinner to choose a humble place, lest they find themselves embarrassingly displaced. He warns that the person who comes with ego's claims, constructing their identity by competing and comparing their social worth to another's detriment, will inevitably suffer. Surely all of us at some time in our lives have experienced how precarious social status is? Or job status? Or financial status? Or any other competitive 'success' we allow to define who we are. When we depend on status or success for our sense of self and our security, we are always afraid of being unseated in the next round of competition. Stars fall. Pride comes before a fall. Pedestals and head tables are dangerous places.

The first banquet story is sometimes called 'A Lesson in Humility.' Humility, I think, is not about falsely putting yourself down in the hope of being lifted up. It is about taking the place that opens to you, trusting that you will always have a place at God's table. Humility comes with realizing we are all equal in God's eyes. Trusting that Jesus invites us, every one, into his circle.

And that circle keeps expanding with God's grace, like a game of Musical Chairs, where every time the music stops there is one more seat, rather than one less. When choosing your place in any social situation, including right here, can you trust to grace and be open to whatever surprising new Presence might end up beside you?

Today's reading from Hebrews contains this wonderful caution: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels, unaware." Have you ever shared a meal with a strange angel? Or sat beside one in church?

The second of Jesus' banquet teaching stories *insists* that we invite strangers to supper. Especially strangers who can't return the favour. That is true biblical hospitality - unreciprocated, unqualified welcome. Hospitality to strangers was a survival value for Jews. So often in their remembered history, the Hebrew people were in exile. They knew what it felt like to be the refugees and outsiders, hungry or excluded from the social order.

We know that Jesus and his followers were itinerant peasants, who didn't carry a store of food. They depended on the hospitality of strangers for their meals. So Jesus' second banquet story reminds the listener that true blessings are found when the hungry and displaced come to your table...as he did...and he still does.

This story is a continuing challenge to us all today. Inviting strangers and eating with those who can't claim our social status, is uncomfortable. Uncomfortable now, as it was for observant Jews then. O, what will we do if they can't eat what we eat? Or if they sit in somebody's place? Or make a noise or a mess? Or if we aren't used to their accent or table manners, their age group or sexual orientation, or that coffee cup in their hand in the pew beside you?

Welcoming strangers isn't easy. It changes us. Changes where we sit and how we share the banquet God lays before us. This reminds me of the brave appeal that Sara Miles put before her San Francisco church, when she wanted to start the first of her now famous food pantries. In 'Take This Bread: the Spiritual Memoir of a 21st Century Christian' she shares her letter to the congregation:

"I wanted to send a personal note to let you know why I've been pursuing the food pantry. The first time I came to the Table at St. Gregory's, I was a hungry stranger. Each week since then, I've shown up - undeserving and needy - and each week, someone's hands have broken bread and brought me into communion.

Because of how I've been welcomed and fed in the Eucharist, I see starting a food pantry at church not as an act of 'outreach' but one of gratitude. To feed others means acknowledging our own hunger and at the same time acknowledging the

amazing abundance we're fed with by God. At St. Gregory's, we do it now on Sundays, standing in a circle with the saints dancing bright above us. I believe we can do it one more time each week - gathered around the Table under those same icons, handing plastic bags full of macaroni and peanut butter to strangers, in remembrance of Him."

Miles put a compelling sacramental challenge before her congregation; invite the homeless and hungry into their sanctuary to share their feast. Upend the table order of communicants! Scatter the comfortable seating plan for their feast, in order to live up to God's seating plan as presented by Jesus. God's seating plan is a circle because no one is permanently last or first. It is an open, inclusive, stretching and ever-expanding, really demanding circle.

What struck me in the third banquet story, is the Master's anger and demanding intensity about the necessity for the open feast. This was more than an invitation. It was a must. You have to fill the tables! Those who refused the invitation to God's rather messy feast, would never taste the spiritual fruits.

Today I hear the Master modelling righteous anger for us - right anger at injustice - the social order that still excludes so many from the feast of plenty we enjoy here in the first world. I hear the urgency of the Master's demand to us now, to see the inevitable consequences if we do not heed his global invitation. Ultimately, the privileged first world will be last. We will starve for spiritual fruit if we don't include the developing world, including our own indigenous nations, in our table plan.

We can no longer continue to seat ourselves first at God's banquet of life. We can no longer invite to the food table only those who can invite us back. We can no longer defend the doorways of our nation against immigration. God is calling us to change the seating plan - radically. To open up our communities into an inclusive circle where we can see the strangers face.

We can't exactly make a circle in this particular space, but we can practise entertaining strange angels. Check out the one sitting beside you since we shifted seats this morning. Look for one in a different seating place next Sunday. If we dare to open up the circles in *every* arena of our lives, what angels might come to us, to share the fruits of God's spiritual banquet? Trust, that there is a place with every name on it. Including yours.

Let's sing: Draw The Circle Wide More Voices #145