

An Empty Chair

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Coming to the table, growing up, involved learning a set of lessons imparted by my stepmom. She taught me how to read a dinner table. She joked that if we ever had dinner at the Whitehouse, this would be important to know. Many years have passed and we're still awaiting that invitation, but in the meantime, she gave me all the tools I'd need to sit at a new or unfamiliar table. I can distinguish a salad fork from a dinner fork, and a teaspoon from a soup spoon. As a child, the first place I'd check was the space above my plate, hoping to find a desert fork or spoon. As an adult, my eyes light up if I spot that teeny, tiny fork, reserved for shellfish or oysters. I know that when in doubt, move from the outside of the place setting inward, as the meal goes on. Never sit at the head of the table, unless asked, and always wait for the hostess to begin eating before taking your own first bite. Many say this is all outdated, but the ability to read a dinner table is a potentially helpful practice. Especially for those of us who fantasize about being invited to dinner at Downton Abbey.

This past week, I learned a new way to read a dinner table. Located just beyond Katy, the Brookwood Community is an educational community for adults with special needs. Brookwood celebrates the vocation of all people by engaging individuals in meaningful work and including all people in a community of belonging, welcome, and dignity. Joe Mazzu, the Director of Development, showed me around the dining room and taught me how to read the dinner table. Every seat at every table is prepared with a laminated card designed especially for each citizen of the Brookwood Community. Through pictures, the card indicates that particular citizen's tastes: from their favorite beverage and food to their favorite musician and sports team. To read these tables is to read the

story of a person, and the story of people living in a community which seeks to satisfy the deepest longing of the soul: to be known and to be understood.

Taking in the whole room, a solitary chair caught my eye. Off by itself, away from the tables, it seemed like it sat empty in waiting, reserved in case a guest arrived. Joe explained that it was not a spare, as I'd thought, but that it was reserved for a guest. An empty Windsor chair, called God's Chair, sits in many of the rooms at Brookwood to serve as a reminder of God's presence in the community. I counted one in the dining room, one in the chapel, one in front of the gift shop, and I can only assume there are more throughout the campus. For every empty chair, a reminder-God with us.

Coming to the table of a leader of the Pharisees, Jesus reads the meal customs of his time. At this meal, the Pharisees would've taken stock of places to recline and eat. All places to recline were ranked according to social status, so to sit down was to make a statement of self-worth in the context of community. As a powerful group, they undoubtedly fumbled for a configuration which offered each personal recognition and high esteem among their peers. And when Jesus "noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable." When coming to the table, Jesus told them a story-Jesus told the truth-Jesus shared the gospel.

We are forever coming to the gospel to hear Jesus tell stories about us. And Jesus is forever telling stories that tamper with the idea of "us." Jesus can be found, time and time again, disrupting and revising the story of "us," expanding our view and vision of just who, exactly, falls under the category of us. God-with-us is a radical promise sealed in the word Emmanuel. We've tamed the word Emmanuel and neutralized the radical promise it holds. We have swaddled Emmanuel and laid him in the hay, singing our sweetest songs on a starry, cold night in Bethlehem. But Emmanuel left the manger and grew up into a man who resists our attempts to confine or placate him-straying from our company to eat with sinners, heal lepers, and befriend prostitutes. We find that

we can't control who God will be with, whose company God will seek, and whose life God will claim and redeem. Even scarier, we can't fathom the lengths God is willing to go to do so. And the great scandal is that God in Christ asks us to go to the same trouble.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, begs an obvious, but subversive question: "Who is us?" Jesus sits with Pharisees at a table, and he wants to tell one story about a banquet, about the way we read tables. Jesus wants to tell another story about a dinner party of guests who are blind, poor, crippled, and lame. When Jesus is at table with "us," he wants to talk about the "them" of the world-the poor, the meek, the oppressed, the ignored, the inconvenient-the social outcasts.

Jesus tells us these stories and these stories tell us Jesus, the story of God-with-us. The story of God-with-us never turns out like we thought it would, never leaves us the same after we've heard it told, never fails to introduce a cast of characters we'd assumed weren't involved, but this story always helps us see each other.

Coming to a new congregation, outsiders read the table. All faith communities set a table, intentionally and subconsciously, that beckons those who hold the same taste as us. Our community bears signs and symbols of welcome and caution. The values we articulate, the ministries we support, and the language we use are all like silverware on a dining room table: they indicate what can be expected when we gather together. People beyond our community will wonder if the invitation to belong includes them.

Those outside the community will wonder: Am I old enough to serve as an elder? Can I bring my partner? Am I welcome if I pay more in student loans than I tithe? What will they say about my diagnosis? Is it okay if our family can only come every other week? Do I have to be an American citizen? How will I get there since I don't drive anymore? If I tell my silliest joke, will they laugh? When I share my heartache with them, will they weep with me? Can I be myself and be embraced? Yes, they want to know: is there an empty chair for

me at St. Philip?

Coming to God's table, far from reading it, we find that this table reads us. It tells the story of our salvation and our belonging in the kingdom of God. This table satisfies the deepest longing of the soul: to be known and to be understood by a God who was himself rejected and excluded, who taught and who healed, who was crucified and raised to life-all to prepare a place for us here.

If, in our hearing of these words of Jesus, we believe that what he asks is that we act more modestly, give without agenda, and spend time with people who aren't like us, we've missed the point. These are not table manners, nor are they proverbs for righteous living. These stories are an invitation to new life. These stories are a summons to reconsider what we think we know about community. These stories are themselves an invitation to a banquet feast in which the Host will invite folks from east and west and north and south, from Montrose and Memorial and the Heights and Pearland.

God is bringing us into relationships which don't depend on what we can give or take. God is setting a table where there is no separate time or location for Meals-on-Wheels, church potlucks, and the Lord's Supper. God is planning a party that never runs out of room. God is inviting us to a table in which all are secure in the knowledge that we are accepted, beloved, known, and understood.

If we do not keep an empty chair for guests, there will be no place for God to sit. How will we set the table? A new seat. An invitation. An empty chair. God with us. Thanks be to God.