



Meeting Jesus at the Table

Week 4: Relationships and Reciprocity

Lori Lampert - 03/19/2023

Last summer our message series focused on the gospel of Luke. So, this week, while we are looking at Meeting Jesus at the Table, I found us revisiting the words of Jesus that we explored in August. Some of this message may sound a bit familiar. But I have decided that that is ok. We revisit the life of Jesus week after week. Today you are not the same as you were seven months ago. Neither am I. You've lived through the fall of 2022 and the winter of 2023. Let's let the Holy Spirit use this Gospel story to teach us something new as we approach this encounter at another table and open our hearts to learn.

The table. A meal. As we walk toward Easter this season, we are looking at the many ways Jesus uses this everyday experience of sitting together as an opportunity to engage with people. With people of his time as well as us today. At a picnic where the entire earth becomes his table and everyone is included in a meal of abundance he provides. At the home of a man who has been despised for his role as a collaborator with Rome as he collects taxes and skims as much as he can from the people of his community. It is there Jesus demonstrates that no one is excluded from the table where he will sit. At the home of a Pharisee where the meal is interrupted by a woman, that woman, whom others have labeled and excluded, yet Jesus loves and includes.

Over and over, Jesus is showing us all with his words and his deeds a vision of what the world will look like someday when, as we pray each time we gather at the communion table, Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet. And how the world is able to be now, today, because the victory has already been won. Christ has died, Christ has risen, and the power to be transformed by the Holy Spirit is not someday, it is here, now.

Let's open our minds and hearts and revisit this encounter with Jesus.

There is a fascination for many of us with the British upper crust. and after my family visited Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina just this past Thursday, the largest private home in the United States built by the Vanderbilt family, I would include our country's Golden Age as well. From *The Crown*, to *Downton Abbey*, to *Bridgerton*, we watch a world that seems so removed from us, both historically and socially. There is a right way of doing things, and to deviate from this 'rightness' is, well, unacceptable. It's all about the clothes, the houses, and the card. Calling cards, dance cards, and place cards. Actually it's all about what those cards represent. Status, acceptability, and again following the established rules of etiquette.

In no place is status—and knowing one's place—more evident than at the nightly dinner table. Clothes are changed, places assigned, because where one sits in relationship to the host is vital. If there's a guest of honor, everyone knows who this is by where they sit, who is on their right and on their left.

In these shows there is always an abundance of servants who have been taught to blend into the background. They watch carefully to meet the needs of the guests, react quickly when signaled, and quietly deliver the next course. In some instances, there is one servant for each guest, and with perfect timing they set the plate before the guest and with a flourish remove the silver cover over the dish. Then they step back, be small, quiet, unseen as the upper crust continues with their elaborate meal.

This same understanding of the “correct” way of sitting at a meal dates back as long as there has been classism which I venture to say is as long as there have been people on the planet who are known as the “haves” and others as the “have nots.” As long as there have been owners and slaves. As long as there have been masters and servants. As long as there has been a distinction made between people.

Bringing all of this into today, we still care greatly about where we are going to sit. And with whom we are going to sit. Now, don't get mad at me please for stating the obvious, but many of you are sitting in the same place today that you sat in the last time you were here.

And I understand, I am sitting in the same place each week. You all do it for a variety of reasons. Keeping the kids quiet is easier from the back, as you are able to get up and chase them around. Hearing well, seeing unobstructedly, and ease of access are important. And for many of you, there is great comfort in sitting with the friends and relationships you are building here. It is lovely to worship with familiar people

Yet, where does a person who is here for the first time sit? Where does the person who wonders if they can be included sit? How does the person who has taken the great risk of venturing into the doors of The Downtown Church find themselves received, accepted, welcomed? Or did we get so caught up in our own comfort that we didn't even notice they had come? Ouch. Sorry.

Those are the thoughts that have been running around in my head once again as I began to prepare for this message. The words of Jesus, found in Luke 14, are all about where people sit. The culture of the Greco/Roman world had rules for acceptability and propriety.

And nowhere was this made more evident on a daily basis than at a meal. The most honored guest sits at the head table, and then each person

moves out from that spot in order of their importance to those gathered. You should know your place. With a glance around the room, it should be made evident to you where you should sit. Once you have claimed your seat, if someone more prestigious arrived you would be told to move and make that space available.

So imagine. There is a head table at a state dinner for the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Thailand. You are invited, and you have always wanted to sit by the President.

The chair is empty to her left, so you plunk down in it and begin to enjoy the salad course. A moment later, the secretary of state arrives and you are asked to move. Now. Embarrassing, but you get it. It's obvious you sat in the wrong place.

Imagine that same scene once again. This time, as you take your first bite of lettuce, you are asked to move. Expecting it to be because someone of more prestige has arrived, you look and see that it is a servant being seated—the one who let you in and took your coat. And then you notice that one by one the places are being changed. The servants are being seated until the entire head table has been turned over. Including the President and the Prime Minister. They have been relegated to the back of the room.

I love the episode we are looking at today in the life of Jesus. I can picture it. Once again, he is eating in the home of a Pharisee. Luke wants us to know that Jesus is being watched closely. As Jesus draws closer and closer to Jerusalem, the stage is being set for his crucifixion. Information is being compiled. Records of the times when Jesus spoke out against the religious leaders of the day, of his alleged sedition against the Roman government, even of when Jesus had taken the sacred words of God and had the audacity to expand their meaning. He is being watched.

And Jesus is watching too. He is watching the many ways in which humanity has come so far from the way in which God created us to be. He is watching the social norms of the day and how each person created in the image of God has been classified, labeled, and placed in immovable categories of acceptable and unacceptable

Jesus is watching as people vie for the most coveted place at the head table. Today this looks like getting there early, folding a napkin, and placing it on the back of the chair to let everyone know this seat is taken. Leaning a chair forward to save the seat. Placing a purse or a coat across several seats to make sure there are places for others so you can all sit together.

Where do you suppose Jesus was sitting that day long ago so that he could take in this scene? I imagine the Son of God, the Messiah, the one who has multitudes following him and has the power to call down 10,000 angels is sitting way in the back of the room. Away from the head table. Away from the power struggle being played out before him.

Jesus speaks these words from Luke 14: 1, 7-14. I'm reading from the NRSV. Page 953 in the pew Bible.

¹ 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.

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he

may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Wait, what? Jesus wants us to give up vying for the place of honor? Concede the struggle to be the most important? To gracefully hand over a prestigious position for what is obviously a lesser place at the table?

Wait, what? Jesus is telling us to set a table for, well, just anyone? People who cannot reciprocate with an invitation to their home? People who require extra effort to accommodate? People who don't know which fork to use, or any social etiquette at all? Them? Those people?

Yes. That's exactly what Jesus is saying. It's simple. Jesus has come to turn the world upside down by changing the heart. It is obvious when people have encountered Jesus and they are healed physically. The blind see, the paralyzed man picks up his mat and walks, the woman who has been bleeding for years has her health restored, the woman stooped over by arthritis stands straight. Just a moment ago, at this same dinner, a man with severe edema in his legs—called dropsy—is cured. On the Sabbath no less.

Now Jesus is speaking in order to heal our hearts. Our character. That which, when transformed, impacts so much more than we can imagine. 11

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Humble themselves. Did you catch that? Choosing to be humble. Purposely making the decision to live a life of humility.

Humble. Free from arrogance and pride.

Often C.S. Lewis is credited with saying that humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less. But actually that was Pastor Rick Warren. What theologian and author C.S. Lewis actually said in his classic book *Mere Christianity* is this:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

With his words, Jesus is working on our hearts. He is showing us a more excellent way to live. And in our culture of me first, get out of my way, it's your fault, this change of heart toward humility seems like we are living upside down. But so be it. Because as we choose to let pride diminish, as we choose to quit struggling to win, as we become more concerned about the

person who believes they have no place at the table, or who has not even been allowed in the room, we will find the world is finally right side up.

Wealth and position are used to bless others. There is no longer a head table, there is a round table where we sit looking at one another instead of gazing down at anyone. We are not worried about what others can do for us. Reciprocity is not our issue. Hospitality is. Generosity is. Inclusion of all is.

I want to invite you to let these words of Jesus rattle around in your head and heart as they have in mine. Not as words of condemnation or judgment, but as words of instruction and as a gift. Let the Holy Spirit mess with you a bit.

Notice Jesus noticing you. He is here, in the back of the sanctuary. He is here in the gathering space. He is here upstairs with our kids. He is in the homes of those watching online. And he will be watching as you leave this time of worship.

The Holy Spirit will be prompting you. At times to step aside. At times to step way back. At times to step up and include those you used to not see, those you used to avoid. At times to set the table without expectation. And to do it all because you want to become free from arrogance and pride and live the way of Jesus Christ. A way of humility.

Imagine this one. You are at the King's Table, set with far more tableware than is necessary for any human to enjoy a meal. The candles are lit. The servants are standing behind the chairs ready to seat you, to place the napkin on your lap, pour your wine, and bring the first course. Then there is a sigh from the back of the room, just a sigh. But you hear it, and so does everyone else.

The room shifts. The servants are seated. They have become the guests, and you are now asked to care for them. To give to them what they would never have expected or asked of you. Has the world turned upside down or right side up?