

## Proper 17: August 28th, 2016

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Title: The Dinner Party

In urban, 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, we tend to think of ourselves as fairly evolved people - people not necessarily bound by custom, tradition, and taboo. But if we reflect thoughtfully on all the unspoken norms that govern our common meals, we might think twice about that. The silverware is placed in a certain order. The glasses arranged just so. There's a polite way to choose a seat - no one enters another person's home on Thanksgiving Day and plops down at the head of the table - and to take your seat: how to scoot in, and, depending on your gender and age, whom to assist. The napkin goes in the lap. Maybe there's a prayer, or a clinking of glasses. We don't chew with our mouths open. The use of fingers is circumspect. No elbows on the table. Yes to tearing the rolls. No talking with food in your mouth. Yes to passing the salt and pepper. No reaching across the table. Yes to complimenting the chef.

But where did all this come from, and does it really matter? After all, my sister-in-law, born and raised in Pakistan, doesn't mean to invade my space when she heaps seconds on my plate, uninvited. She is just showing her love. And my not-quite-two-year-old doesn't mean to be rude when she puts her elbows on the table. She is just getting into a better position to steal my steak. The norms at table differ from country to country, culture to culture, region to region, family to family, and until someone breaks one, we are often blissfully unaware of our expectations.

On one level, today's Gospel seems to address some rather mundane details of ancient meal-time propriety. But, as he so often does, Jesus is actually using the everyday and ordinary stuff of life to make a rather profound point. Jesus has joined a group for a meal at the home of a leading Pharisee, meaning this particular host is likely to be extremely concerned with *the rules*. Moreover, it's the Sabbath, when there are even more rules for Jews to observe. Jesus watches everyone take their seat, then tells them a parable about a wedding banquet. He tells the guests not to presume they belong in a seat of honor, lest someone more important, more connected, closer to the family, shows up late - as often happened in those days - and the host has to ask you to move. It's much better, he says, to take the lowest place and be asked to move higher, move closer, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus also has some advice for those throwing parties, urging them not to invite their family, friends, and rich neighbors, but those most in need and most likely to be left out: "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind," for they cannot repay the kindness, and in that act of selfless generosity, there will be a blessing.

The often unspoken, even unconscious, rules that govern our time at table *do* matter, because they reveal something of our unspoken, even unconscious, beliefs about who we are and how we are called to be in relationship with one another. There's a lesson here about pride and humility, about hospitality and generosity; a lesson about undeserved grace and unexpected honor. Mostly, though, there's a lesson about our common humanity and our common dignity.

In 1964, a young French-Canadian named Jean Vanier, visited a friend in Paris who worked at an asylum for men with severe intellectual disabilities, which he soon visited. The 80+ patients institutionalized there spent their entire day walking in a circle, with breaks for meals and a two hour mandatory nap. The conditions were heartbreaking. The atmosphere was bleak. Vanier was a devoted Catholic and a man of deep prayer, and he was profoundly shaken by this experience. His spiritual mentors encouraged him to "do something" with this distress, and just a

year later he bought a house near the asylum and invited two of the men living there to move in with him. Soon he invited more friends, with a diversity of intellectual capacities, to join their makeshift family, and the first L'Arche community was born.

Vanier was not interested in running an institution. Rather, he was committed to cultivating a community which placed the needs and care of the most vulnerable members at the center of their common life. Vanier enthusiastically welcomed guests and visitors to his home, and people invariably found there a depth of joy, a shock of hope, and the palpable, playful, presence of the Holy Spirit. Today, there are 147 L'Arche communities in 35 countries, and on all five continents. I've had the great joy of visiting three such communities on three different continents, and can think of no greater example of the mutual love this morning's readings commend. Henri Nouwen, the theologian and author of numerous books, including "The Wounded Healer," retired from teaching at Yale Divinity School in 1986 to live at Daybreak, a L'Arche community in Ontario. In his words, "L'Arche exists not to help the mentally handicapped get 'normal,' but to help them share their spiritual gifts with the world."<sup>1</sup>

Look around. This is God's dinner party. You made the guest list! And so did everyone else here, and everyone who couldn't make it this morning, And, well, *everyone*. That's the good news – the best news – if we are centered enough to receive it as such. So who's missing? Who haven't we made room for at the table? Who did we forget to offer a ride? Whose needs haven't we considered? And just as important, is the person sitting to your side your rival – someone to measure yourself against, someone whose status or value or opinion or reputation overshadows your own, or pales in comparison to it? Or are they a companion, an equally hungry friend, a brother or sister?

Pride is, I believe, one of those words slightly ruined by overuse and misuse. Both humility and a certain measure of pride have a place in the spectrum of a healthy person's felt emotions and practiced virtues, and both can be taken to such extremes as to impede one's ultimate flourishing. There's nothing wrong with having a healthy self-concept, with knowing our strengths, or being pleased when we accomplish something difficult or unexpected. But esteem can and does slip into arrogance; delight in deed to delight in dominance; gratitude into self-aggrandizement. On the other hand, humility keeps us grounded, open, and curious. It invites collaboration and connection, and can lead to generous living. But a healthy awareness of our flaws and limitations is different from a fixation on these things. We've all known people who literally cannot take a compliment, cannot see the good in themselves, and cannot meaningfully connect as a result.

Ultimately, Jesus calls us, as he so often does, to a middle way by calling us out beyond ourselves and beyond our own needs. This is *God's* dinner party. The rest is musical chairs, and we have very clear instructions for how to play. Give walking humbly and living generously a try. You just might find you don't need to wait until the resurrection to receive the blessing. It's actually the main course. **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Boers, Arthur. "What Henri Nouwen Found at Daybreak." *Christianity Today*, October, 1994, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1994/october3/4tb028.html?start=2>. Accessed August 27, 2016.