

Proper 17C - August 28, 2016
St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Peoria, Illinois
The Rev. Jenny Replogle

It's a scene I remember all too well from school. Walking out of the cafeteria line, seeing all of the tables of people and needing to decide where to sit. Sometimes I was new, but sometimes a table of friends was already completely full - several chairs had already been pulled up to an overcrowded table. And I was left in that awkward moment of staring into a room full of people, trying not to look nonchalant rather than give away the flood of anxious thoughts going through my mind. There was always a table or two filled with popular folks - maybe I was friends with one or two of them, but could I really sit with them? And then there was always a table or two where I knew I did not want to sit - maybe because I thought they were awkward, or in seminary, because I did not want to be drug into an adversarial theological discussion before I had even my coffee in the morning. I can still remember the dread and stress of needing to weigh all of this together and make a split-second decision, hoping that someone would catch my eye and invite me over.

I don't know if school cafeterias here in Peoria are like this, but this is a memory etched into my mind. And considering the number of times I recall seeing something like it on TV shows and movies, I think it must be common enough. Now, part of the reason that it is so engrained in me was because of how long it went on for me - not just through high school, but through college and then seminary at Princeton. Even well into my late 20s, this was a common feature of my day. And while you think it might get better with a little age, in some ways it seemed worse. In seminary, it felt like we had so many of the same high school dynamics of cliques - and as one professor reminded us, if you think there were strange and awkward folks at your school, try putting together 500 people who believe they are called by God to do something. The seminary social ladder also came with the added pressure of needing to develop a network for your career, as well as being told frequently that seminary is where you would find your friends for life, those who are the only ones who would really understand you in this calling. So that moment in the cafeteria, unable to choose a table among the crowd of future lifelong friends, often just felt pretty scary and lonely.

Frankly, for all I talk about the sacredness of eating together and how wonderful it is to share meals, I largely hated those days of communal meals, and I avoided the place when I moved back for 3 years. But I do have another memory in Princeton, just across the street, that gave me a different glimpse of life around the table.

At my last parish, Trinity, we began a ministry called One Table Cafe. At One Table, we served healthy, sustainable meals provided by local restaurants. We did our best to turn a parish hall into a candlelit restaurant environment. And there was no charge. People were asked to pay only what they could. The beauty of One Table was that while a few volunteers served in their black and whites, everyone else in the congregation was encouraged to come eat along with anyone from the community who wanted to come. We offered a healthy, restaurant meal and experience to people who otherwise could not afford such a thing - but we didn't separate our community into rich serving poor, as if it were an inversion of the normal structure. Instead, One Table offered the community to sit at the table and share a

meal together, to get to know each other. Every month I heard the rector say “This is One Table because it is a vision of the one table where we gather every Sunday. We don’t have separate tables for black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor. There is one table that is God’s table, and all are invited to come.” One Table Cafe tried to be a glimpse of that, tried to make God’s kingdom true in this world.

It’s that vision of the kingdom that we hear Jesus talking about today in our Gospel reading. The passage starts by telling us that Jesus is going to eat a meal with the Pharisees. Let’s just go ahead and say now that while we may think we would love to sit down and have a meal with Jesus, the accounts we get in the Gospels make it seem that in fact, he was a pretty terrible dinner guest. This is even the Sabbath meal - it is their weekly chance for a delicious meal with fine wine to be enjoyed while relaxing with family and friends. But Jesus starts off by healing a person in the verses we didn’t read - starting a controversy because it was the Sabbath. Then he goes on to criticize the guests, followed up by insulting the host. Not exactly the ideal guest.

In Jesus’ critique of his guests and hosts, it seems at first that he is just offering advice on the social structures, but in doing so, he tells us something of the kingdom of God. First, he sees the guests vying for the best place at the table. I’m not sure there is anything quite like this in our society, but I have to say that remembering the school cafeteria was the closest I have experienced. In that culture, a dinner party both reflected and had incredible influence on your social status. It was an honor to sit close to the host, but the farther away you sat, the less honor you had. In fact, we read in some ancient writers about dinner parties where different food was served to those farther down the table - good food and wine reserved for the host and those close to him.

And when Jesus talks about the possibility of being sent down the table or being invited up the table, this was not just a moment of embarrassment or glory that would be forgotten the next day. Those actions would affect your friendships, your business deals, who your children might marry. It had everything to do with your social status, which affected every area of your life. So in some ways, it seems that Jesus is offering sage social advice - set yourself up to be honored rather than embarrassed.

But Jesus goes on with words for his host, the one who had invited him. So far we’ve only dealt with the pecking order of those at the table. But even the lowest person at the table was ahead of many others because they had been invited. In the process of wrangling for position, it would be easy to forget that many did not matter at all - the ones who had not been invited.

So Jesus tells his host that he should not invite his friends, relatives, and rich neighbors - those who might be able to return the favor. He tells him instead he should invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. He should invite those that society cast off. Those are the people who were believed to have done something to deserve the lives they had, and consequently they had no status. They did not belong at even the lowest place at the table because they did not have a place at the table at all. They did not fit into the order of society because they simply were not part of it.

If we weren't sure about it from Jesus' first words, his advice for his host makes it clear that he is talking about something completely different from what anyone else had known. It might be easy to think at first that Jesus is simply switching the order of position - the last shall be first and the first shall be last. But to do so would only switch the roles of the oppressed and oppressors. It is we humans who are obsessed with order, with where we stand against one another. And if you think this is only the Pharisees, remember that James and John asked if they could sit at the right hand of Jesus in his kingdom. They thought they would just wait till heaven, then take their positions of honor. But Jesus is bringing something different than any of us know, doing away with this system of vying for positions of power and personal gain.

The kingdom Jesus is building is one in which all are not just welcome. In this kingdom, all are equally loved, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. We are invited, not because of anything we have or haven't done, not because of anything we can or can't do for God in the future. We are invited because we are loved by a God who is longing to free us from the life-sucking systems that rule our world.

We are all invited to the table because we are all loved. This is the good news of the kingdom of God. Too often, passages like this are used to excoriate pride and encourage a humility that is self-destructing. Christianity has used passages like this to tell people to be content with not having a voice at the table, or at least encouraged a humility that makes people feel that they don't belong at the table. This has often been told to minorities, to women, people of color, and LGBT people, not just by culture, but by the church as well.

In the book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, the CEO of Facebook, she talks about women in the workplace still not feeling as though they have a place at the table, both figuratively and literally. She talked about how women most often suffer from the 'impostor syndrome', feeling as though all they accomplish is somehow a fluke, while men tend to credit what they accomplish with their own hard work. When I read her words, I felt like she was talking about directly about me. I remember explaining away how I scored well on tests, having convinced even myself that it was an accident. This continued on with anything I did well through school and work, and I still struggle with it today, always worried that soon others will figure out the truth.

With an incredibly high number of women experiencing the same thing, it is pretty clear that this is encouraged by our culture. And to be honest, the church didn't help a lot with so much encouragement to not think of myself too highly, and still today echoes loudly culture's criticism of women with any ambition. Because of this, I understood well Sandberg's observation that women struggle to believe that they belong, and as I read this passage, I could not forget her illustration of being afraid to take a place at the table.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we all are invited to the table because we are all God's children. At that table we are to know and live out the truth of who we are, and able to take part in proclaiming and sharing that truth with our world. We are all loved and we are all

invited, and to refuse to take our place at the table to which God invites us is as sinful as pretending that we are God and the table is ours and that we can decide who is invited or place ourselves above others. This is true humility - to know who we are as children of God. To think of ourselves as less or more is an aberration of the truth, but the truth frees us from the struggle of position and prestige that surrounds us and allows us to live into the dream God has for us and our world.

At this table, this table of God, we are all invited because we are all loved. None of us comes to the table because we deserve it, but because we are loved by a God who will not let us go. Our God has given us all a place at the table, and we must take our place at the table so that we are able to invite others, and to take part in living out the dream of God here and now. Each of us is called to make this a table where all are truly welcome, where no one has more power than another, where all are given a voice and heard. Whatever privilege we have is to be used to change bring the kingdom of God among us, to give place to those who have not had a place before.

And that is work for all of us to do. One does not have to look far in our world to know that some voices are incredibly powerful while others are barely heard, and we separate ourselves into millions of tables rather than listening to and honoring those from whom we are different. Who are those in our society who are not invited to the table? Who are those invited to our church? Are they only those who can carry their weight and bring something that helps us? Or do we invite those who can never repay us, except as they will show us the kingdom of God?

Are the poor, crippled, blind, and lame of our day invited to the tables of our church, our community, our nation? Inviting them will go against the social structure and powers of our day, just like Jesus. But it is what we are called to do. And in doing so, we will take part in building the kingdom of God, creating that one table for all - rich, poor, black, Latino, white, straight, gay, single, divorced, married, young, old - together we will see a vision that one table where one day we will all feast together.

So come, join us at this one table where you are invited because you are loved more than you can imagine.

And then go from here and spread that good news, telling everyone about that love and inviting them to take their place at this table so that we may grow closer and closer to the kingdom of God here among us, so that here at this table together we may catch a glimpse of heaven. Amen.