

When I was younger and we visited my maternal grandparents for the holidays, there was an adult table and a kid's table. The adult table had fine china, cloth napkins, fancy chairs and was in the Dining Room. The kid's table had six hard chairs and six regular, everyday plates and paper napkins and was in the kitchen. Now mind you my grandparents lived on a farm and nothing was real fancy, but I always longed for the day when I would be able to sit at the first class adult table. Even though I am the oldest grandchild, my younger cousin married early, and she and her spouse moved up to the adult table. Let's just say even though I was older, my place was still at the kid's table and truthfully we always had way more fun than the adult's table ever did. Debie Thomas, a writer and theologian, tells the story of her father when he was 4 years old growing up in India. Thomas' grandparents were devout Christians, and it was often the case that elders and preachers spontaneously showed up at their home for lunch after Sunday services. "Food wasn't always plentiful in those years, and cooking rice and curry over a wood stove took time. Because the rules of hospitality dictated that 'men of God' ate first, Thomas' father and his siblings had to wait quite a while to eat on Sundays. Only when the honored guests had had their fill and left would Thomas' grandmother gather the leftovers and feed the kids. Well, Thomas' father didn't find this weekly arrangement pleasing. One Sunday afternoon when he was feeling especially hungry, and his mother had already chased him out of the kitchen a dozen times, he just plain lost it. Marching into the dining room where the guests were relishing their second helpings, this 4 year old stuck his little hands on his hips and yelled, 'Get out! Hurry up and leave so I can eat'" (journeywithjesus.org)! I think Jesus would have sided with this little boy because he wasn't known for his politeness around food either. Point in case today's

gospel story. Did you know that Luke has more references to eating, banquets, tables, and reclining at tables than any other Gospel? It suggests that sitting or reclining at the table is where many of Jesus' teachings take place, including today's parable. "That the table is a principal site for fellowship and discourse for Luke's telling of Jesus should not escape notice" (Rodney Sadler, *FOW*). Did you also know that in Luke's Gospel there is a recognition "that the oppressed cannot be lifted up as long as the oppressors remain in power, and the poor cannot be lifted up without the rich being brought down" (*The Preacher's Bible Handbook*). We aren't told much in today's Gospel story about Jesus' arrival at the Pharisee's house and table on the Sabbath; however, we do know that Jesus had just healed a man with dropsy on the Sabbath (vv. 2-6) but still managed to receive a dinner invitation to the Pharisee's house. Maybe more out of entertainment or curiosity? We aren't told why. Regardless, there, we are told, Jesus observes how the guests chose the places of honor. These guests knew the pecking order, and it becomes a race for who gets the best seat. My brother and I fought over the front seat on the way to school most mornings, and my dad would get so angry with us. Calling for it never worked; we would sometimes wrestle one another. Have you ever requested a better seat or worked the system in order to get better seats? Jesus' response to what he saw was to tell a parable. He told a story of the seating chart at a wedding banquet. This ritual of sharing a meal together quickly turns into a lesson on kingdom living. Jesus knew the Jewish culture as well as the Roman-Greco culture. The Roman social system was divided into honor and shame where there was a place for everyone and everyone was in his or her place. This way of thinking spilled over into Jewish culture as well. "In this kind of society, status was everything, and the way you gained status or power was through a system of

mutual patronage- you did persons favors who then owed you, and vice versa” (David Lose, *Daily Bread*, Oct. 29, 2013). You know- a little quid-pro-quo- “this for that.” An “I’ll scratch your back, if you scratch mine” kind of relationship. So when Jesus first speaks about seating arrangements, the guests probably got it and appreciated Jesus’ advice on how to navigate the social setting into which they were invited, as this was practical wisdom.

Jesus’ parable of seating arrangements and table manners is Jesus’ way of saying, “we are capable of so much more than this.” “Jesus is inviting them to move from transactional relationships to transformational relationships. To move from survival-based, get-what-I-need kinds of relationships, to table-turning, ‘reign of God’ kinds of relationships. Relationships where traditional tables are flipped, and doors are swung wide open, and chairs are brought in from the neighbor’s, and bread is broken- together- with all of God’s children” (Campbell). It’s not just a parable about where people sit; it’s about who has a place; who is invited. However, Jesus’ parable also deepens Luke’s theme of conflict as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem...on the road to the cross. There’s a price to pay for this table-turning. This is the fourth Sabbath controversy of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. The Pharisees did not appreciate Jesus’ claim of lordship over Sabbath activities, including healing on the Sabbath. Now Jesus tells the hustling guests to follow the traditional wisdom guiding proper etiquette at a meal in the presence of an aristocratic host with seating arrangements. Jesus knew that meals were times/places that revealed the social disparities in the first-century world. Jesus is promoting genuine humility when he says, “For all who exalt themselves will be

humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (v. 11). But then Jesus takes a deep dive and violates what is taboo. He does the unthinkable and confronts his host, which was a no-no. Jesus reminds the host not to invite those who can repay him, but rather to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, who can offer nothing in return. Jesus says that the reward for this curious obedience may be claimed in the resurrection of the righteous. In other words, “As God’s people humble themselves and seek to live by a different social system marked by radical inclusion, they can trust God to be faithful and to reward their right ways of living in that final day” (Jeanine K. Brown, workingpreacher.org). Regardless of this promise, I’m sure to the host and his guests this advice seems a bit crazy or worse, offensive. “In a world where the exchange of mutual obligations was not just expected but actually common sense, who in their right mind would squander their status and privilege on those who can offer nothing in return? It’s absurd, foolish, and even ludicrous. Which is probably how you know it’s of God. Jesus comes to Jerusalem not just to challenge the kingdom of the world, not to reform it, not to make it better. He comes to overthrow it, to put before us an entirely different way of being, a whole new way of relating to each other, and so pretty much everything he says about caring for each other with no regard for status or repayment makes absolutely no sense in light of the values of that day. Or ours. And so after laying the logic of God’s kingdom alongside the logic of the world, Jesus then embodies what he teaches by giving us all that he has. That is, after all, one way of looking at the cross” (Lose).

“According to Jesus, the privilege that allows some to have a place over others, the privilege that allows some to have influence and power at the expense of

others- that is a relationship driven by fear, driven by the give-and-take system we have created for worldly survival- a give-and-take system that is far from the kingdom Jesus envisions” (Campbell). Remember Luke loves reversal of expectations and status. The person who is in the most important seat actually takes the lowest seat at the table. In effect, Jesus may be saying that the Kingdom of God is like radically reversing the world’s notion of importance?! The first shall be last, and last shall be first type thing. Maybe kingdom living looks like not serving because we think it makes us look important or not because we may earn a reward in heaven but because we choose to take Jesus at his word. Tony Campolo, in his book *Red Letter Christians*, writes, “When Jesus said that you should invite the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind to your banquets, then you should. When Jesus talked about nonviolence, we should take him at his word. The problem with a lot of religion is that people have ‘interpreted the Gospel so much, that we’ve started to believe the interpretations instead of what Jesus said.”

When Jesus addresses the host, the parable is over. This isn’t an invitation. This is a command from Jesus. A command to not avert our eyes from those who are different but to invite them to the table- they might not own; a meal they may not ever be able to pay back. A command to follow him “rather than those who baptize common prejudices as virtues. We who have been baptized into Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3) are called to conform to him and to his ways. To live into our baptism is to be ever mindful of those who are typically left out” (Ronald Byars, *FOW*). As followers of Christ we’re called to do kingdom living every day. “We cannot love God,” Catholic Worker editor, Dorothy Day, wrote in her memoir “The Long Loneliness,” published in 1952, “unless we love each other, and to love

we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore.” Here at Christ’s table there are no head tables or seating arrangements. Everyone is invited to come and share a meal where Jesus is the host. And we’re sent from Christ’s table to gather around other tables and build relationships with people who aren’t like us as we break bread together.

Whenever Debie Thomas’ dad retells his childhood story of being rude to their guests because he was hungry, his daughter tells him that “Jesus applauded that ravenous little four-year old who broke the rules and challenged the hierarchy. In fact, Jesus may have just ushered those men of God right out of the room and insisted that the little children eat first. Favor the ones who cannot repay you. Prefer the poor. Choose obscurity. We don’t determine worth at Christ’s table. Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters- because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. This is God’s world we live in; nothing here is ordinary” (Thomas). So may we surround ourselves and develop transformational relationships with those who are typically uninvited to the table. Amen.