

Aldersgate UMC
Sunday, October 5, 2025
Put Another Leaf in the Table
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Luke 14: 1, 7-14 NRSV

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.”

It seems fitting to explore this parable in Luke’s gospel on this World Communion Sunday...and as the Thanksgiving holiday and season of advent near. As it is with so many of the parables of the Bible, there’s lots to discover in this seemingly straight-forward lesson on hospitality and humility. So, what exactly is happening in this scene as described in Luke’s gospel, and what might we gather from this lesson?

Jesus has been invited to a wedding banquet hosted by Pharisees, ones with whom he's had a complex relationship, disputing one another on many occasions. This was likely a feast for the socially elite, and perhaps wise, influential, and admired Rabbis like Jesus; and certainly, a hierarchy of importance exists among those in attendance. And amidst all this, Jesus shares a parable with them, one that eliminates barriers of class and cultural difference and ethnicity. He encourages them not to presume a place of honor, but rather to "hang at the kids table" and if the host invites you to the "grown up table", then take your place there. Simply put, "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Let's pause here for a moment. Many of us have likely had the experience of sitting at the kids table during a big holiday gathering... longing for the day when we are deemed mature enough, special enough to be invited to the table of grown-ups. I was brought up in such an environment – there were expectations for inclusion at the grown-up table such as manners and etiquette and decorum. And I'm not so sure Jesus is saying, "throw that all out the window." But he is instructing guests at this banquet not to consider themselves elevated above another, or better than others. And while the table for big people may have perks such as special wine and crystal and fancy side dishes...I often long for the kid's table, where I'm not expected to know which fork to use or where I can lean an elbow on the table if I'm tired. Sometimes I long for a place where I can be me, quirks and all, and still be accepted, loved and appreciated. In this parable, Jesus is using table fellowship and social etiquette as a metaphor for the kingdom of God, and as illustration for our role in pastoral fellowship. Jesus is reading the room and giving everyone love, and grace and acceptance without condition.

Jesus goes on to share another lesson as part of this parable. He instructs them not to extend an invite as a gift, anticipating something in exchange. But rather, just allow your everyday acts toward another to be a blessing to them. Don't seek blessing. Live your life as a blessing. He encourages them to turn their hearts toward the hurting, the struggling, the vulnerable, ones who cannot repay them. And he goes on to say they will receive their reward from God. It's likely not a coincidence that in the New Testament the word "banquet" is used as a symbol for the reign of God and the kingdom of heaven. We are invited to live our lives as this banquet described by Jesus, where everyone is honored.

AGGGGG... so five minutes into this sermon, I find myself thinking, “it all sounds good in theory, but it’s not possible in real life.” Let’s be honest, we love getting special treatment and added perks. We love being elevated and rewarded. I welcome the day the airline suddenly upgrades my ticket to first class at no additional charge; and I’ve eagerly dashed to the express line when a spot becomes available on more than one occasion. I can honestly say I have never turned down a bonus check from an employer or declined a free stay at my favorite hotel. On a similar note, I fall short when it comes to the literal interpretation of today’s parable. I’m not the type to invite a complete stranger to dinner or engage in a conversation with someone who I view as completely opposite my morals and values. So, I guess, if I were to measure my thoughts and actions against Jesus’ teaching at the wedding banquet, I’m in desperate need of reform. The deeper question for reflection might be, “what have I done to turn my moments of privilege into blessings for someone else?” That bonus check at work comes in handy when I extend support to local ministries and food drives. And while stranger-danger is a real thing in my life, I can still be supportive and hospitable to those I don’t know without putting myself in an unsafe situation. I can provide a meal for someone who doesn’t have food or split and stack firewood for someone in need of fuel for their home this winter. I guess what I’m saying is radical hospitality can take many forms. And it’s important to explore how each of us can uniquely apply our gifts to this banquet of love. Someone might be best suited to offer free assistance with filing taxes or tending a community garden which serves the Food Bank. Someone else might be a classroom mentor or serve as sponsor to someone in Alcoholics Anonymous. We all have “Superpowers” – and especially the superpower of LOVE.

Jesus enters the banquet and introduces a key element – he stresses the reversal of social and economic power. This is something our world has wrestled with since before the birth of Jesus. We hear so much now days about how rising inequity leads to adverse economic, social, and political consequences. And how the distribution dynamics of our world must be at the forefront of policymaking decisions. We witness disparity and continually ask ourselves, what can I do? I’m going to offer a timely metaphor... let’s put another leaf in the dinner table. Let’s explore all the ways we can make more room for others in our lives, in our systems of service and in our thoughts and understanding. Let’s continually S-T-R-E-T-C-H and expand our hearts

and minds to create more seats at the table of humanity. Opportunities to put another leaf in our table – to expand our hearts and minds – abound.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, we hear about his theology of radical hospitality and coming together as community. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we again are reminded not to regard others with contempt and to go deeper into seeing others as God sees them. Mother Teresa diagnosed the world's ills in this way when she stated, "we've just forgotten that we belong to each other." Another word for this belonging, this inclusivity, would be *kinship*. With kinship as the goal, other essential things fall into place; without it, we have no justice, no peace. Were kinship our goal, we would no longer be promoting justice – we would be celebrating it.

During the Lambs of God Message I discussed some of the special ingredients that go into preparing a meal and gave each of them my super-special ingredient to take with them – LOVE. What I didn't share was a little more info about the design of their LOVE pin. It's rather generic – just the letters LOVE printed in black on a white background. It's very similar to something I can recall from the 1970's. I distinctly remember my dad walking into the house one weekend with a six-pack of generic beer. White cans with the word BEER printed on them. It seemed so odd. It didn't have flashy colors, or descriptions about what variety of beer it was, it just said BEER, and whether he bought it out of novelty or for the reduced price, there it was. We live in a world of brands and so many varieties of everything, so it seems strange to see something void of marketing and distinct targeted messaging. We hear the same messages at times about LOVE – terms like Christian love, or unconditional love, or traditional love relationships. But what if we allow ourselves to speak of LOVE as 100% generic? What if we freely promote LOVE as void of any need for condition or exception or further description? Is Christian Love different from Jewish Love? Does our table get a little bigger, does our heart open a little wider when we remove distinctions? I believe Jesus was encouraging attendees at the wedding banquet to invite guests in the spirit of LOVE – black and white, no strings attached...LOVE, or as Mother Teresa would say "kinship" – remembering we belong to one another.

I'd like to end with a blessing that is recited every morning at the Helena YWCA, a place of welcome and love – may it provide hope and healing for you today.

Today may there be peace within, may you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others. And may you use the gifts that you have received and pass on the love that has been given to you.

Peace to you – Peace!