

The Table of Hospitality

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 9, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 14:12-26](#)

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Jesus liked to eat. At least there are lots of stories in the Gospels about him eating. We did a little brainstorming about Jesus and food at the Monday Morning Bible Study last week and found it was easy to create a significant list. All four gospels have stories of Jesus feeding thousands of people with very limited food supplies. The Last Supper (the scripture reading we just heard) is, of course, a story of Jesus eating with his disciples. There are resurrection stories of Jesus eating with his disciples.

Jesus uses a wedding banquet as a metaphor for the reign of God in his parables. Luke has a story about Jesus visiting two sisters, one of whom listens carefully to what Jesus is saying while the other is busy making sure dinner gets ready. There's a story of Jesus going to Peter's house where his mother-in-law is ill. Jesus heals her and she gets up and makes everybody something to eat. There are stories of seeds and the good news of them maturing and being harvested to be made into flour, which is made into bread for people to eat.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew's gospel about how the nations will be judged, and it all comes down to how they treated "the least of these." Did they clothe the naked? Did they give water to the thirsty? Did they visit those who were sick and imprisoned? And did they feed the hungry?

And, finally, there are a scattering of stories throughout the gospels of Jesus being judged because of who he eats with.

In Mark's and Luke's gospels,¹ Jesus eats at the home of a tax collector named Levi. The other dinner guests include other tax collectors and people who are simply labeled "sinners." Mark doesn't explain why they are labeled this way. All we know is that they are judged to be sinners, and that Jesus is judged for eating with them. There's a very similar story in Matthew's gospel, only the named tax collector is called Matthew.

Whatever his name, he's not the only tax collector Jesus ate with – at least according to Luke. In Luke 19,² we read a story of Jesus inviting himself over to the home of a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. While that story doesn't say that Zacchaeus served Jesus a meal, we can assume it happened. Zacchaeus was rich (not at all surprising, since he had a patronage job that supported the Roman occupation) and the social norms of the time would have demanded he serve a meal to his guests.

Mark's version of the anointing of Jesus takes place at the home of Simon the Leper – and it takes place while they're eating a meal.³ First of all, can you imagine being known by

¹ See Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32.

² See Luke 19:1-10.

³ See Mark 14:3-9.

your disability, for your disability to become essentially your last name? Ya gotta feel sorry for Simon the Leper. And he's not even "Simon the former leper." He's Simon the Leper. Since he had a home, he had to have had some money, so he's not Simon the Pauper. But he is Simon the Leper, and one isn't supposed to associate with people who had a skin disorder that was considered leprosy. And yet, Jesus is there, sharing a meal with Simon the Leper, when an unnamed woman comes in and anoints him, pouring nard over his head.

Jesus encourages this same kind of behavior, this dining with the outsiders, from his followers – at least according to Luke. In chapter 14, Jesus offers this advice: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."⁴

All of this invites us to take a closer look at today's Gospel lesson. According to Mark, it's the day of preparation for the Passover. Passover will begin at sundown, which is when the Jewish day begins. It's the day when households would prepare the special Passover meal to remember how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. It seems as if the disciples are the ones to remind Jesus what day it is, but I think Jesus was well aware.

Jesus sends two of his disciples to go into Jerusalem to get the meal ready.⁵ "He told them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.'

"So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal."

Now, this part of the passage can be read to suggest that Jesus was prescient, that he could see what was going to happen before it happened. However, I think this had been pre-arranged. It's almost like a scene from a film noir. "Go into the statue of General Grant. There you'll see a man in a pinstriped suit with a red rose pinned to his lapel. He'll lead you to a man ..."

Jesus knew what was happening. He had set up his entry into Jerusalem on Sunday, his parade that was a counter demonstration to Pilate's show of force when extra Roman troops entered the city in the days before the festival that celebrated liberation from oppression. Go fetch the donkey; here are the code words you'll need so they'll let you take the animal.

Then he went and upset the marketplace in the Temple courtyard. He had pushed the limits of the Roman's and the religious elites' tolerance of his preaching, preaching he'd been doing at the Temple. And now he was going to be arrested. He even knew who the snitch would be. He knew which of his disciples was going to betray him to the police.

⁴ Luke 14:12-14, *NRSV*.

⁵ Mark 14:13-16, *NRSV*.

The dinner had been prepared. He and his disciples gathered in the upper room, all 12 of them. And while they were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” You can imagine the disciples murmuring: He’s not talking about me, is he? He can’t be talking about me. Jesus said, it was one of them, and that for the one who would betray him, it’s going to be an awful burden to carry. He may wish he had never been born.

Judas was right there. He knew that Jesus is talking about him. And he continued to eat. Then, while they were still eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. And he took a cup, gave thanks for it, and gave it to them, and they all drank it. My point here is that Jesus included Judas. He ate with Judas. He shared the first communion with Judas.

I read recently (I don’t remember who said it) this pearl of wisdom: “When you learn to sit at the table with your Judas, you’ll understand the love of Christ.”

That’s what grace is: love that is so deep and so wide even your betrayer is welcome to your table. And that’s why the communion table is truly a table of grace. Grounded in that grace, the communion table becomes a table of radical hospitality. The [Alliance Q](#) of the Disciples of Christ has a motto: “All Means ‘All.’”

We say that all are welcome at the table. The Alliance Q reminds us that “All means ‘all.’” No matter what you’ve done, no matter what you’ve failed to do, no matter what you’ve experienced in your life, you are welcome to the table. Grace makes the table the table of radical hospitality. No matter how deeply you believe, no matter how deeply you doubt, no matter who faithfully you follow or fail to follow the way of Jesus, you are welcome at the table. Grace makes the table the table of hospitality. And I truly believe that, at the table of grace-based hospitality, lives can be changed.

It turns out that it’s not only at the communion table that lives can be changed. During the past five days, while I was at the Annual Gathering of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, I asked a colleague what his primary strategy was to help his congregation move from being a primarily white congregation to the congregation of European Americans and Filipino Americans. He had a one-word answer, “Food.” They’re doing lots of eating together. They’re doing that because they know that magical things happen at the table of hospitality.

People share their stories, their joys and their sorrows, when they sit with one another and eat. And it is so needed. In a time of increased isolation, higher fences, perpetually locked doors and gated communities, and an ever-present attitude of “not in my backyard,” we need the magic that happens at tables of hospitality. We need an antidote to the neurological predisposition to automatically fear whatever feels “different.” Sure, this predisposition helped our species survive.

But we’re past the need to survive. To truly thrive, to successfully address the global challenges humanity faces and have lives that thrive, we need to embrace our differences and find strength in our diversity. Radical hospitality – the hospitality you and I know and have experienced at the communion table – just may be the magic that will get us there.

Amen.

Questions for contemplation:

1. When have you experienced radical hospitality beyond the communion table and what did that experience do to you?
2. Who do you tend to see as outsiders?
How does Jesus' model of radical hospitality challenge you to be with?
3. Who do we (as a church) tend to see as outsiders?
How does Jesus' model of radical hospitality challenge us to be with?