

Pentecost 17C  
Peace, Seattle  
August 28, 2016  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

## **THE MEAL THAT TRANSFORMS**

**Jesus spends an awful lot of time at dinner tables in Luke’s gospel.**

And when we look carefully at the scenes Luke records we find that something significant always seems to happen when Jesus sits down for supper in someone’s home.

**Jesus knows what we all know—that something happens when people sit next to one another at a table. There’s an equality that’s assumed by those who eat together. A bond is formed. Accepting an invitation to dinner at someone’s home means you accept them and they accept you.**

**And when Jesus accepts dinner invitations, Luke tells us, he doesn’t stick to social peers.** He goes to the homes of Pharisees and tax collectors; to the elite and to the outcasts. He goes to the big estates of the wealthy and to the small shacks of the poor.

**And when he goes, it’s a guarantee he’ll be carefully watched. But what his hosts inevitably find out is that HE is watching them, too. And in today’s story we find him noticing two things in particular: (1) Who is choosing to sit where, and (2) Who is on the invitation list.**

Christ’s word to the ever-competitive, jostling-for-the-best-seats-culture he lived in (and we live in) is: **All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**

His advice to his class-conscious, I’ll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine hosts is: **Expand your invitation beyond the usual suspects. Include people who will never be able to repay you: the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Fellowship at a table like that will bring you blessing far beyond what you can imagine.**

As we listen in on this conversation, what we’re really hearing is a description of the inclusive Meal Jesus himself instituted; the Meal that’s at the center of our life together.

In her book, TAKE THIS BREAD, Sara Miles describes how, one day, inexplicably, she was drawn to step inside the door of a church in her San Francisco neighborhood that she’d walked past every other time. That door belonged to St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church.

**“I had no earthly reason to be there,” she writes. “I’d never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian...I had no idea what Episcopal meant...”**

Once inside, she found herself curious but cautious. And when she heard the words: “Jesus invites everyone to his table,” she found herself coming forward with others. “And then,” she says, “something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.”

Crossing the threshold into this totally unexpected encounter with the living Jesus changed Miles’ life. “[Jesus] was as real as the actual taste of the bread and the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sara Miles. *Take this Bread*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007) p. 59

The experience Sara Miles struggled to wrap her mind around that day became a kind of obsession for her. And as her conversion deepened, she began to grasp the radically embodied nature of that Meal and the ministry of feeding which would become her driving passion.

**Later, Miles reflected on what she calls the “contradictory” nature of this Meal.**

The entire contradictory package of Christianity was present in the Eucharist. A sign of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, it was doled out and rationed to insiders; a sign of unity, it divided people; a sign of the most common and ordinary human reality, it was rarefied and theorized nearly to death.

And yet that meal remained, through all the centuries, more powerful than any attempts to manage it. It reconciled, if only for a minute, all of God’s creation, revealing that, without exception, we were members of one body, God’s body, in endless diversity. The feast showed us how to re-member what had been dis-membered by human attempts to separate and divide, judge and cast out, select or punish. At that Table, sharing food, we were brought into the ongoing work of making creation whole.<sup>2</sup>

**The kids and I went to St. Mark’s Cathedral on Thursday for a service of blessing for a new Totem Pole created by the House of Tears carvers of the Lummi Nation.** This 22-foot totem pole will be making a journey of nearly 5,000 miles around the U.S. and into Canada, stopping at many different communities, both tribal and non-tribal, along the way.<sup>3</sup>

**As it travels, it bears a message, captured powerfully in the stunning art of the pole.**

**The message is a simple one:** It calls upon communities everywhere to unite around a vision of a healed relationship with Mother Earth, and to oppose fossil fuel megaprojects that will further endanger both Tribal lands and Earth’s climate future.

When Native spiritual leaders offer blessings, I’m always struck by the inclusive nature of the ceremony. As Chief Lane of the White Swan Dakota put it Thursday: We don’t put limits around the ways people approach God in prayer.

There were several things worth noting from the blessing ceremony and the speeches that followed. But one thing that particularly stuck with me is a statement by head carver Jewell Praying Wolf James. He said, THE TOTEM POLE ISN’T SACRED BY ITSELF. IT’S THE GATHERING OF PEOPLE AROUND IT THAT MAKES IT SACRED.

When Jesus holds a mirror to our patterns of exclusivity; we begin to recognize that by limiting our invitations to people who look like us, act like us, pray like us, experience like us, we cut ourselves off from something sacred, we cut ourselves off from the reign of God.

It’s the community of folks as broken, confused, and hobbled by life as ourselves—yes we’re all that way!—that make these sacred gifts alive for us. For Christ comes among us beggars as a beggar himself, and in the cross shows us that it’s in the territory of the least, the last, the lost, and the forsaken that he will be found: God with us, and where we are brought by him into the work of making creation whole.

When religious experience becomes too regulated, stratified, domesticated, or preoccupied with form, we stand the risk of loosing out on an encounter with the living Christ that can truly transform us.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 76-77

<sup>3</sup> Read more about it here: <http://earthministry.org/gal-the-belief-2016-totem-pole-journey/>

**The way forward isn't to strive toward perfection but to receive the gift of his complete acceptance and embrace in the most dismal territories of our own souls.**

Grasped by such grace, we can't help but offer the same radical welcome to all who find themselves hungry for bread that will satisfy. And this, then, becomes a template for shaping the ministry of our congregation in the world.

**In the words of Brother Martin:**

“When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship... all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy.”<sup>4</sup>

**The question then becomes: What can we do to extend this table, this feast of grace and acceptance out into the world?**

There are a number of answers to this question, and a number of ministries that provide food to folks who need them on a daily basis.

**Many of you are or have been involved** in these ministries through the years, from making sandwiches for Angeline Shelter to delivering Meals-on-Wheels, from serving at the Community Meal, to distributing food through the White Center and West Seattle Food Banks, or preparing meals at the Compass Center and other places—including your table at home.

But while the hospitality Jesus talks about certainly includes ATTENDING TO THE NEEDS of those who HUNGER FOR BREAD, Jesus also talks about ATTENDING TO THE SPIRITUAL HUNGER which exists in the world, and providing food that will meet people's appetites for meaning, for hope, for community, for God.

In that sense, this story from Luke's gospel goes beyond physical feeding, as essential as that is. **Who do you know—friend, family member, neighbor, co-worker—who needs to be invited to this kind of banqueting table? To feast on hope? On meaning? On community—once again, or for the first time?**

God's radical hospitality to us is so clearly evident in the way in which Christ invites to his Table all who hunger and thirst.

- Sometimes that hunger shows itself in the need to be accepted as I am—for who I am.
- And sometimes that hunger is an inner appetite for a place of true belonging.
- Sometimes our hunger deepens when we recognize that old ways of meeting needs only leave us lost and empty.
- And sometimes that hunger is a ravenous longing to be filled with forgiveness and to begin again.

**We are all beggars**, Brother Martin said as he lay on his deathbed.

Whatever your hunger this morning, whatever your need, Christ will meet you here, just as he promised. And don't be surprised if you end up leaving this Table with another appetite...the appetite to find other beggars and to tell them where true bread can be found.

Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament, 1519