

Welcome to the Table

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Luke 5:27-32 and Luke 14:1, 7-24

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There's an old Middle Eastern Proverb that says 'I saw them eating and I knew who they were.'¹ In Jesus' day, table fellowship was the marker of identity. The people you ate with were, by definition, the people you lived with, socialized with, worked with, worshiped with. Guest lists were not casually made; parties were not posted on bulletin boards or MySpace, and you certainly didn't crash them. You ate with *your* people. The closest parallel we might have is the lunchroom of a High School in America, where every girl in the place knows where she's welcome and where she's not. The geeks wouldn't dream of sitting with the cheerleaders, the Goths wouldn't sit with the geeks, and the musicians don't even go to lunch – they just hang out with each other in the practice rooms. God forbid you should break the rules. People might think you were one of *them*. "*I saw them eating and I knew who they were.*"

Jesus made life complicated. He was a teacher – *rabbi*, they called him – but rumor was he ate with anybody. The rumors turned out to be true. Publicans and tax collectors were at the top of the list. Tax collectors were loathed. In those days Israel had been conquered by the Greeks and then taken over by the Romans, and to say the Jewish people resented their rule is a vast understatement. The tax collectors – publicans – were Jews who worked for the Romans. They fraternized with the enemy. Their job was to collect the outrageous taxes demanded by the oppressive Roman government. Of course it was a lucrative job, because it meant you got to take a cut for yourself. A self-appointed bonus.² Jesus ate with people like *that*. Then there were the sinners. We think, 'well, aren't we all sinners?' But these were people whose actions were so notorious they couldn't even show their faces in synagogue any more. He *ate* with these people!³ It was as good as putting a stamp of approval on their behavior, don't you think?

It makes me think about this woman I know back home. She was married, the mother of two children, one in college, and one still in High School. She had an affair and left her husband for the other man. As if this weren't bad enough, she had the

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary, p. 78.

² See Craddock, p. 77.

³ Craddock, pp. 77-78.

audacity to buy a house in town, right on the main street, mind you, and she lives with this guy. The divorce isn't even final! She says she wants to be near her son, and close to her work at the University, and near what friends she has left. Though there aren't many left who will have her over for dinner anymore. Not after what she's done. Can you imagine?

Jesus had a nasty habit of eating with people like that. The Pharisees didn't like it, as you can well imagine. The Pharisees were the guardians of religion, but that doesn't tell the half of it. They were the guardians of the culture, of community, of identity. In the Greco-Roman world the Jewish people were being swallowed up. If the Pharisees didn't keep a tight lid on things, people might easily decide that blending in with the dominant culture was pretty attractive. There was an exciting world out there, sophisticated, interesting, inviting. What was to keep people Jewish? Keeping the people of God together was an overwhelming, almost Herculean task.

The two most important tools they had were Sabbath-keeping and table customs. If they couldn't keep table-fellowship clean, and the Sabbath pure, how were God's people different from anybody else? How would anyone know whose people they were? Who you ate with defined identity.⁴

I saw them eating and I knew who they were.

I have a friend who was a seminary classmate of mine. She's from the Midwest, but after she graduated from seminary she got married and her husband got a job in Atlanta, so they went south. Not long after she got there she was at a luncheon at Columbia Seminary, sitting next to someone she hadn't met before, a local pastor who had grown up in the area, and whose father and grandfather were pastors. He turned to her and asked, "So, who are *your* people?" Eventually she understood what he was asking: How are we connected? Do we have friends in common? But she heard was, "Why should I bother to care who you are? Are you one of *us*?" In fact, he didn't know any of her people, and she didn't know any of his, and the rest of the lunch was awkward.

If you've ever been on a cruise where the tables are assigned, you know awkward. You hope and you pray that you aren't set up with people with whom you have nothing

⁴ See Craddock, pp. 102-103: "We cannot stress too strongly the central importance of table fellowship in that culture, in the ministry of Jesus, in the early church, and among New Testament writers, Luke most especially... What we have to keep in mind is that table fellowship and Sabbath observance were identification marks for a community struggling to maintain identity among many foreign and some hostile influences."

in common; or worse, who are downright offensive. The loud, brassy ones who have opinions about everything, who cannot take a hint. The ones who have ‘causes’ that they’re selling, and won’t stop until you either buy it, or prove that you’re just another misguided, close-minded reactionary, in their eyes. The ones who insist on telling you about their brilliant children and grandchildren, over and over again until your eyes glass over and you have another glass of wine just to get through dinner. The ones who make you try to bribe the captain just to get another seat at another table, hoping against hope that it isn’t a reproduction of the one you just left.

Here’s what Jesus would tell you: you don’t get to decide where you sit. And you don’t get to decide who you sit with. Because it isn’t your table; it’s his. And he gets to decide the seating arrangement. It almost sounds like our idea of hell. Guess what? It’s his idea of heaven.

What have we gotten ourselves into? If this is the kingdom, how on earth are we going to get through dinner?

My friend Chandler Stokes tells of memorable dinners at his house when he was growing up. His father was a businessman who did a lot of international travel. He also had a lot of people come through town, people he inevitably invited to dinner, giving Chandler’s mother all of about one hour’s warning. She learned to be prepared. Chandler hated it, especially when these ‘guests’ ended up staying overnight, as they always did, because his father would keep them up drinking until the wee hours of the morning, telling off-color jokes that would make his mother flinch. Chandler hated it because he was stuck sharing a room with his sister, who hated having Chandler in her room as much as Chandler hated being there. His father even brought home guests for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving! It was supposed to be a *family* holiday, for pete’s sake; not a U.N. convention.

Who were these people with their funny accents and weird ways? It didn’t help that they were all engineers, with no social skills in their own language, let alone English. His mother felt it was her Christian obligation – simply to welcome the stranger, even if that meant having two people she could barely talk to show up at the last minute and get plastered with Dad.

It was only in retrospect that Chandler figured out something about these funny men. They were Japanese and German engineers. Nothing surprising about that; Japan

and Germany were at the forefront of engineering. Only he also knew something about his father. His father had served in the Army in World War II, and seen a lot of battle. You know where he fought? In Germany, and in Japan.⁵

Table fellowship is a funny thing. You see people eating and you know something about them. You see the company they keep and you learn a lot about them. Whether it's the people they choose to sit with in the lunch room, or the people they invite for Thanksgiving dinner, or the ones they avoid if they can help it.

There's another Thanksgiving dinner I heard about not long ago. The hostess was an ardent Christian of the Fundamentalist variety, and quite evangelical with her beliefs. Her grown children and their spouses were there at the table. So was her ex-husband, which I thought showed gracious generosity; it had been thirty years since they had shared the Thanksgiving table. You know who else was there? Her ex-husband's gay partner, with whom she was completely at ease. It was a table of grace.

The kingdom of heaven has an interesting guest list. "His people" aren't necessarily the ones we would choose. There's assigned seating at his party, and you won't know ahead of time who your table-mates will be. But I'm afraid it's out of our hands.

I saw them eating and I knew who they were.

I don't know how people define themselves here. I don't know how you figure out who 'your people' are. Is it by the school your kids attend? By the colleges you went to? By the Clubs were you are a member or the causes you support? How do you know who your people are?

Here's the thing I know about the kingdom. The only table that matters is the one where we're about to share together. The one Jesus has invited us to join. Jesus thinks of us as 'his people,' and that's all that matters.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ Thanks to Chandler Stokes for sharing this story in his unpublished paper for the 2006 Moveable Feast, for May 21, 2006, on Acts 10:44-48.