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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 14: 1, 7-14

### **“Family Dinners”**

I can fondly remember helping my grandmother set the table for family gatherings. I was probably 12 or 13 years old when I would go to Mimi’s house on Saturday mornings to help her set the table for whatever occasion the family was gathering.

We would set the table a week, possibly two weeks, in advance . . . a habit my Mom has inherited. Because the family was large, we often set two tables – one in the dining room, and one on the porch just off the dining room. The number didn’t seem to overwhelm Mimi. In fact, I think it was something she cherished since she was an only child. “All these people from me,” she used to say. And she was more than prepared to host all of us. Mimi didn’t have place settings for 4 or 6 people, or even 12. She had place settings for 18, 24 and even 36 people.

Growing up, setting the table for dinner was one of my routine chores – it’s a chore my kids now do – so I knew where to put a knife and fork and napkin from a young age. But learning where to place a wine glass, a water goblet, and a champagne glass, was something I learned from Mimi. To this day when I set my own table for special dinners, I think of Mimi, especially when I use goblets or plates that belonged to her.

She took great care in setting the table. For her, it was a labor of love – it was an art form. She knew gathering the family was important, and she knew that what would happen around the table was important. After all, we learn things at family dinners; about one another, and about the world; youngsters learn by watching their elders . . . we learn serious things, and things we might not learn if we weren’t around the table.

I also learned silly things at the table . . . like how to use a white napkin without really using the napkin because these are hard to get clean! I learned about history and politics, and got a taste of wine and champagne at a young age.

Important things happen around the dinner table.

Jesus knows this, because he does most of his teaching at a dinner table. It's true! From beginning to end, there are more references in the Gospel of Luke to meals, tables, and banquets than in any other Gospel. In Luke, the table is where Jesus teaches, scolds, and welcomes. The table is also where Jesus gets into trouble! Jesus' critics accused him of being a drinker and a glutton (7:34), and they didn't like it that he ate with some real riff-raff. Some of his greatest miracles happened around a table, like the feeding of the 5000 or turning water into wine. At a Passover meal, Jesus will make a Eucharist of ordinary wine and bread (22:14-20), and in chapter 24, Jesus is at the dinner table with his disciples when, upon breaking bread with them, their eyes are opened and they recognize their resurrected Messiah for the first time (Luke 24:30). In Acts, the Jerusalem church will criticize Peter for eating with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:1-3). When we come to chapter 14 in the Gospel of Luke, we find four separate stories in close sequence—one of which we heard today—that all take place in the context of meals.

All of these depictions of Jesus in the context of communal meals have led biblical scholars to recognize that “nothing can be for Luke more serious than a dining table” (Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation*, p. 175). Throughout the Gospel, as one interpreter has astutely noted, “Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal” [Robert Karris, *Luke*, 47]. And not just because he was hungry! Jesus knew important things happen at the table, because dinner time is as much about feeding the soul as it is about feeding the body because sharing bread creates relationships and builds community.

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A recent national survey asked people—“What is the phrase you most long to hear?”

The overwhelming answer was rather predictable: “I love you.”

In a solid second place was “I forgive you,” (also not surprising).

The third most longed-for phrase? “Dinner is ready!”

It's a call that for generations represented the most important moment of the day, a confirmation of family life . . .

A few months ago the Atlantic Monthly magazine published an article titled “Why We Eat Together”. In it the author says:

“The table is a place of memory where we become aware of who we are and with whom we are. Around the table, all previous meals come together in every meal, in an endless succession of memories and associations. The table is the place where the family gathers, the symbol of solidarity, or indeed the backdrop to family rows . . .”

When my boys were in high school I often learned if someone had a girlfriend; I swear if I didn’t ask it at the dinner table, I’m not sure I’d ever find out! Important things happen at the dinner table. We know it, and Jesus knew it.

Sadly, Americans rarely eat together anymore. In fact, the average American eats one in every five meals in her [car](#), one in four Americans eats at least one [fast food](#) meal every single day, and the majority of American families report eating [a single meal together](#) less than five days a week. I remember my son Henry said once, at a family dinner, that his friends thought it was weird that we ate together. “What do they do for dinner?” I asked. “Eat it in their rooms,” he said.

Of course, we all know why families eat together less often. After-school activities, late workdays, long commutes, night meetings. Hey, there are nights I’m out every night of the week. And if I’m not out someone else is. Yet studies show that the family dinner hour is an important part of healthy living.

When families dine together, they tend to eat more vegetables and fruits -- and fewer fried foods and soda, research shows. When younger kids frequently eat dinner with their families, they are less likely to be [overweight](#) than other children.

But there’s a psychological benefit to eating together, too. One of the simplest and most effective ways for parents to be engaged in their [teens'](#) lives is by having frequent family dinners, one study shows.

On a national phone survey of 1,000 teens and 829 parents of teens, it was shown that eating dinner as a family helped kids in many ways. It helped them get better grades, and kept them away from cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. One other study showed that students who do not regularly eat with their parents are significantly more likely to be truant at school.

I know at our house we've had serious discussions about drugs and alcohol around the dinner table. We've lamented the deaths of students from accidental overdoses, and talked to our kids about what to do if they find themselves in a precarious situation, and how to say no, and what could happen if they don't.

Important things happen at the table.

We know this, and Jesus knows this. So it probably shouldn't come as a surprise that he does most of his teaching at the table.

In today's story, he teaches the guests, who had thought long and hard about their seats and knew the rules of the day, that they shouldn't sit at the place of honor. "Sit in the lowly place." And then he teaches the hosts, who thought long and hard about those seating arrangements and also knew the rules of the day, that they shouldn't invite their friends, but instead the poor, the lame, the needing. "Don't invite those who can repay the invite."

There are a lot of scholars who like to make this story into much more than it appears to be at the surface, and who are emphatic that Jesus is more than just the Miss Manners of his day – and of course he is.

But maybe his advice is just that simple – that seating arrangements aren't that important; what matters is that you're at the table. That who is invited isn't that important; that what matters is that all are invited. Because what happens at the table is important, not the accoutrements that go with it.

I know I have to occasionally remind myself of this, as I make tacos for the umpteenth time for dinner or worse chicken (chicken again, the kids cry), or we crowd around the kitchen table that's littered with school papers, and the placemat is a little dirty, or they don't match at all. And the glass is chipped.

I have to remind myself that this isn't important, no more important than the seating arrangements were for Jesus. What's important is that we're gathered, and that we make room for one another. To take the time to hear about someone's day, and the good and the bad things that happened during it. That we take time to celebrate and bemoan with them, and console and maybe debate around the table, because that's how we grow in our relationships with one another, and therefore that's how we grow in our relationship with God. Maybe the story really is that simple.

Someone once said, and I think it's true about this story in particular, that:

“When it comes to matters of faith, of what we believe and how we are to live, I worry we overcomplicate things. We concern ourselves with context and cultural understanding and historical awareness. And the knowledgeable and academic pursuit to understand our faith is good and worthy of our time. But it is totally possible that all the answers we're so frantically looking for are, and have always been, right here.

You see, we could take this text today, and we could talk about the table seating order designed by Jewish leaders 2,000 years ago, and why Jesus' comments would have made everyone mad. We could attempt to understand the nuances of early Jerusalem's cultural understanding of dinner invitations and the repayment process.

As 21st century Christians, we are fully capable of knowing all of these things. But I wonder instead if maybe Jesus just wants us to eat together; wants us to have dinner with those we love and those we don't, and to focus on those at the table more than we put into the planning. I wonder if maybe it's all simpler than we've made it out to be.”

I remember years ago at a different church a meeting where we were discussing what had happened at a lunch after church. The people at the meeting were very upset that we'd run out of food, and that one of them had to go to the store to get more chips. I remember thinking that maybe the chips weren't the point of the gathering, that the point of the gathering was that we were gathered, and the chips were secondary.

At the end of his life, Jesus went to the table again because he cared, and he told those gathered to eat together; to invite everyone; to break the bread and pour the cup and do it joyfully and often. The simplicity of this call is easy to miss in this complicated world, but we must resist the urge to make the following complicated, too. So let's eat. Let's gather around the table, because what happens there is important. Because dinner time is as much about feeding the soul as it is about feeding the body because sharing bread creates relationships and builds community. Amen.

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