



TABLE
MANNERS

What to do when Jesus says, "Dinner's ready"

STARLETTE THOMAS

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“Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Luke 14:15, NRSV

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A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Where are my manners? Are you hungry? The last of the pages should be done in a few minutes.

While you're waiting, consider Jesus' table manners, which didn't include washing up for dinner. Jesus and his disciples ate with dirty hands.

He used them to point to what was truly important, teaching the Pharisees and us what really accounts for dirt.

“IF YOU’RE NOT AT THE TABLE, YOU’RE ON THE MENU.”

| MICHAEL ENZI

The growing son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter, Jesus knew his way around a table. He could make one, but he could also prepare one.

Jesus could stretch a meal, feeding thousands with the contents of a lunch bag. He knew the way to the disciples' hearts was through their stomachs, charging and challenging them over a meal.

“Be careful who you bring home,” but Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. “Birds of a feather flock together” and the religious teachers of Jesus' day would agree.

They said Jesus was a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was rubbing elbows with his guests, but their poor choices weren't rubbing off on him.

“Jesus ate good food with bad people,” Jean Leclerc said.

He prepared a table in the presence of his enemies. Jesus set the table with his own body with the cross as his utensil. It is how we dig in and dig deeper in our search for communion with him.

So, what's stopping you from pulling up a chair and taking a seat? All are welcome here.



SCRIPTURE READING



The scripture reading is ready. It's taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14 and is referred to as the parable of the great dinner. Let's read it together:

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."

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' ¹⁹ Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' ²⁰ Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²² And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³ Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"



MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Most families gather around a table. Rectangular or circular, two chairs, four chairs or even more, we extend the table and the conversation.

A quick bite or a full plate, we sit down to take it all in.

The table is as essential to our fellowship as the relationships that bring us to it. And a lot happens around the table.

We learn what happened at work or school, do our homework, and decide who is doing the dishes. “Not me. I cooked.”

We share our lives over a meal and across from each other at the table. We take a seat and no matter who we are, see each other eye to eye. The same can be said of our church’s potluck dinners and fellowship meals.

Leonard Sweet laments in his book *From Tablet to Table: Where community is found and identity is formed*, “Yet... we have lost the table... Instead of setting another plate at the table and passing food, we pass another program or another resolution or another law.”

So often we focus more on the pews or the pulpit. But the table is where Jesus wants to be remembered.

Over a meal and with his followers, Jesus wanted to be included in our fellowship. Not just in passing but while we are passing the bread and butter, the condiments and gravy. In the parable of the great banquet, the first round of dinner guests decide to skip a meal and, in their absence, we learn a valuable lesson.

TABLE MANNERS

is not about which fork to use. I will not remind you to sit up straight or keep your elbows off the table. If you make a slurping noise while eating soup, you’re still welcome. Instead, this is about a kind of hospitality that is indigenous to the Christian faith tradition, the inclusion of the outcasts of society.

This is also a standing invitation not only to loosen your belt but also your restrictions— whatever they are. In these hyper- divisiveness times, we would do well to sit down together and mind our manners.



PRAY OVER YOUR FOOD

Now, I know you're hungry and we don't want the food to get cold. So, I'll keep the prayer short. This prayer is especially meaningful to me. It's one that I pray before all my meals.

I don't bow my head or close my eyes. Instead, I assume that Jesus is present at the table with me. I am a Southerner, and it is my custom to pray "over" my food. I take a deep breath in and out. Then, I say,

Thank you for the table you have prepared. Amen.

LET'S EAT

Does everyone have a seat, a plate, and a drink? Eating utensils? Okay, then pass the bread, please. And let's talk about this story. The details are juicy!

The parable of this amazing banquet is recorded in Luke's Gospel and is a parable within a parable. Or, perhaps, one parable leads to another. Either way, Jesus is at the home of a leader of the Pharisees.

In their company is a man with a physical condition known as "d Dropsy." The man suffers with some swelling due to fluid retention.

**"IF THEY DON'T GIVE
YOU A SEAT AT THE
TABLE, BRING A
FOLDING CHAIR."**

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

But before Jesus extends his hand to heal, he raises his hand and asks the lawyers and the Pharisees a question: "To be clear, is healing legal on the Sabbath or not? Is there a sign or a scripture that reads, 'No healing on the Sabbath?'"

They may have looked around at each other, looked down at the floor or up at the ceiling. But no one said a word, and I imagine that none of them made eye contact with Jesus.

Hearing no objections, Jesus heals the unnamed man. Swelling down and the room quieted down, Jesus asks another question, "If one of you has a child or an ox that



has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?” (14:5, NRSV) Again, Jesus’ question is met with silence.

They all knew the answer.

They are watching Jesus, but he is watching how they choose their seats, which leads to a parable about humility. Pick the right seat or be taken down a peg or two.

“What are you doing? This seat is not reserved for you.”

Be careful or you will be another example of the holy switcheroo: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11, NRSV).

Don’t go choosing the best seat in the house based on who you think you are or where you think you should be.

The choices are humility or humiliation. Choose wisely.

With that, Jesus turns to the person who had invited him and offers pointers on his future guest list. Let this be a lesson.

“When you host your own brunch or banquet, don’t invite your friends or your family members. Don’t invite the rich people.”

“The meal makes no difference because they can return the favor by inviting you to their home.”

“Instead, invite those who are down on their luck, down to their last dime, down in the dumps. Invite those whose limbs are tangled up and whose eyesight has failed them.”

“They cannot give you anything. So, the blessing comes another way and at a later date. Jesus says, ‘You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’” (14:14b, NRSV)

One of the guests heard that and thought, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God,” which reminded Jesus of another parable (14:15, NRSV).

It began as an invitation to the “who’s who” of the community. The list was long, and the host prepared an elaborate meal.

Dinner was ready, so the host asked his servant to relay the message. But they all had excuses as to why they could not attend.



“I just bought a new piece of property, and I need to check it out.”

“I just purchased some new equipment that I’ve been dying to try out.

“I just got married. We’re on our honeymoon.”

They all regretted not being able to attend. But these things happen, right? The servant returned to the host with none of the expected guests in tow.

“They couldn’t tell me before I cooked all of this food?”

Understandably angry and not wanting to waste a perfectly good meal, the host sent the servant back out. “Go into the streets and down in the alleys. Tell those who are in between jobs and one paycheck away from being homeless, those bare minimum wage workers and those differently abled that I saved a seat at the table for them.”

The servant returned and told the host, “I did what you said, sir and there is still plenty of room.” The host then flung the doors open, wanting a full house.

“Tell everybody to come in and fix a plate but not those who were initially invited. No, they won’t get a bite. Instead, this table is for those who don’t typically receive an invite.

Now, does everyone have a seat, a plate, and a drink? Eating utensils? Okay, then pass the bread, please.”

CLEAR THE TABLE

Where are my manners? We can’t just leave the conversation there. When you’re finished eating, help me clear the table and clear up a few things.

1. Healing on the Sabbath is not off the table for Jesus. Follow the rules or do what’s right, what does Jesus’ question reveal about tradition and the law?
2. Humility and hospitality, they go hand in hand. What does Jesus teach us about seating arrangements and table manners?
3. What do you make of the piece of advice given in Luke 14:12-14? What do the guests seated around our tables reveal about us?
4. Turn in your receipt. Jesus says that those who invite those who are experiencing poverty and physical ailments will be “repaid at the resurrection



“I HAVE A DREAM THAT ONE DAY ON THE RED HILLS OF GEORGIA, THE SONS OF FORMER SLAVES AND THE SONS OF FORMER SLAVE OWNERS WILL BE ABLE TO SIT TOGETHER AT THE TABLE OF BROTHERHOOD.”

| MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

of the righteous” (14:14, NRSV). What is the meaning of this kind of dinner party?

5. John Pavlovitz writes in *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*,

“What struck me in the Gospel stories was Jesus’ *table ministry*, the way he so often used the act of sharing a meal, the act of breaking bread, as a way of letting people know that they were seen and heard and known and respected. With great regularity Jesus used common moments to incubate the sacred—everything becoming a sort of living parable to illustrate the tangible reality of spirituality.”

How do Pavlovitz’s words serve your understanding of Jesus’ use of tables?

6. Full of excuses. The food will go to waste if they don’t find more guests. Second choice or next best thing, what does the host’s choice of those experiencing poverty and physical ailments suggest?
7. Be my guest. What assumptions might the host’s initial guests be making in order to skip the meal?
8. Why does Jesus invite his disciples to a table? How does the regular meal become ritual and relational?
9. After the host is stood up, he instructs his servant to take it to the streets. Why does the host desire a full house instead of a party of two or four?
10. Jesus said, “Dinner’s ready.” Guess who’s coming to dinner.



TO GO BOXES

Here are a couple of to go boxes. Take some food for thought, more stories of Jesus around tables and empty tummies with you.

- Eat with your enemy (Luke 5:27-32).
- Unwelcomed and maybe even unwanted, the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment shows up for dinner (Luke 7:36-50).
- When Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people, there are still leftovers (Luke 9:10-17).
- Martha's place is not in the kitchen (Luke 10:38-42).
- Jesus doesn't wash his hands but, in this case, it doesn't matter because he has a clean heart (Luke 11:37-53).
- Jesus can handle sensitive subjects and a salad fork at the same time (Luke 14:1-24).
- Jesus will invite himself over (Luke 19:1-10).
- Jesus will explain it all over dinner (Luke 22:14-38).
- The way to the disciples' eyes is through their stomachs (Luke 24:28-32).
- Comfort food takes on another meaning (Luke 24:36-43).



A NON-COFFEE TABLE BOOK LIST

Don't table the conversation. Talk about the weather and whether they are coming over for dinner or if this seat is taken. Because we need to get closer to each other.

Here are a few books to bridge the gap:

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, *Everyone Belongs to God: Discovering the Hidden Christ*, (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015).

Mike Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion and Community*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

Charles E. Moore, Editor, *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People*, (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2016).

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (New York, NY: Image Books, 1977).

Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: where community is found and identity is formed*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014).

William Willimon, *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016).



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