

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 8/28/16
Season: The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 14: 1,7–14

When our children were growing up in Austin, maybe the most important room in our home was breakfast nook just off the kitchen. The nook held a round oak table and six chairs. Every weekday night it was our custom for the six of us to gather for supper around that table. Mom and Dad, Alex who was in high school, Barbara who was in middle school, Robert in elementary school, and Thania, our friend from Honduras who lived with us for many years and who was going to college.

I loved that round oak table. No one seat was better than any other. We could all look each other in the eye. Everyone could be heard. A lot of love was shared around that table. And there was a lot of learning that went on around that table, not all of it by the children, I want you to know. Everyone got a chance to lead the conversation. Often it was Alex, who even then was a great student of history and current events, and always had an informed opinion to share.

Barbara would talk to us about school and friendships and relationships and life – how joyful life could be and how occasionally hard life could be. Lots of wisdom for such a young person. Thania would share with us about life in Honduras and life here in the states. She always brought a unique and very loving perspective to our table conversations. Time passed, and first Alex and Barbara went off to college and Thania graduated, got a job and moved on with her life.

Zonnie and I will never forget what Robert said to us at our first supper at that round table right after Barbara left for college, and it was just the three of us. Giving us a pretty suspicious look, he said, “I’ve been dreading Barbara going away. Now all the focus will be on me.” And he was right! But it turned out to be OK. Even when it was just the three of us, there was still lots of love and learning around that table, lots of it by Mom and Dad.

Think about your own family experiences. About how much love and learning happens around the table. Jesus certainly knew that. In fact, particularly in Luke’s gospel, we see that so much of his teaching happens around the table. Jesus practiced “open table fellowship” as some scholars describe it. And that was actually quite radical in his day and time. As you’ve heard before, the culture in which Jesus lived and taught was an “honor/shame” culture. So where you were seated at a very public and formal meal, like

the Sabbath meal, was a matter of great importance. The closer to the head of the table, the greater the honor. The closer to the foot of the table, the greater the shame.

Now this particular meal was at the home of one of the leaders of the religious authorities. And we're told that Jesus was being watched closely to see what he might do or say at such an important event in such important company. And so he uses this as a teachable moment. Watching the guests scramble for the places of honor, Jesus advises some humility instead. Go to the foot of the table instead of the head, he says.

If you're invited to move up higher, you'll be honored by everyone there. And then the point of the teaching. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

A radical notion in an honor/shame culture – a culture in which humility wasn't highly prized, shall we say. And it's a no less radical notion for us today. Chest-thumping and swagger and pride get all the air time today, don't they? Humility is too often seen as a sign of weakness. In fact, as Jesus taught, humility is just the opposite. It's a sign of strength – of strength of character and wisdom. And living with a humble heart is really the only way we'll ever learn anything important. To know what we don't know sure beats not knowing what we don't know.

Humility is also at the core of effective leadership. The last two Sundays we've seen Jesus in conversation with leaders of the religious authorities, and much of this conversation is about a new way of being a leader. Last Sunday, in his teaching on healing on the Sabbath in violation of the prohibition against work on that holy day, we heard Jesus invite his conversation partners into a new way of seeing and a new way of leadership based in love and mercy and grace, rather than leadership bound up in rigid legal codes. Today, we call that servant leadership. The real servant leader sees others and sees the world as God does – with the eyes of mercy and compassion and grace. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love as the Bible describes it.

And this morning, Jesus' reflections on real leadership continue. Leadership rounded in humility, grounded in a heart open to new experiences and learning, a heart that doesn't need to control everything and that's open to the movement of the Spirit, that's the effective leader's heart.

There was a wonderful column by David Brooks this Friday that makes Jesus' point about leadership. Did you see it? Brooks is a person of faith and grounds so much of his work in the wisdom born of lived faith. In this column, Brooks reflects on leadership, and says that the effective leader turns experience into graciousness. I love that. Experience infused with grace. He goes on to say:

“These people, I think, see their years as humbling agents. They see that, more often than not the events in our lives are perfectly designed to lay bare our chronic weaknesses and expose some great whopping new ones. Sooner or later, life teaches you that you’re not at the center of the Universe, not quite as talented or as good as you thought. It teaches you to care less about what others think and, less self-conscious, to get out of your own way....the mistakes just have to be made.” Amen to That!

Brooks goes on to say:” Gracious people are humble enough to observe that the best things in life are usually undeserved – the pennies of love you invest in children get returned in dollars later on; the kindness of strangers; the rebirth that comes from a friend’s unexpected and over-awing act of forgiveness.”

Brooks could have been channeling Jesus. These characteristics of grace-filled leadership are just what Jesus was teaching the leaders he was in conversation teaching the leaders he was in conversation with and it’s what he teaches us today.

The humble heart that knows that it doesn’t know and then has the courage to make room for the movement of the Spirit is a heart that is open to seeing as God sees – with the eyes of love and mercy and grace. It reminds me of the chorus of that great Leonard Cohen song, “Anthem.”

“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in”

And it’s no accident that Jesus uses the occasion of a shared meal to teach these deep truths.

The table is that time and place in our daily lives where we come together to share what gives life. Food, friendship, love, just as our little family did those years ago. And Jesus sets a table for us right here, at the heart of our worship. He prepares the feast and invites us all to share in it. On that long ago day, he saw people elbowing each other out of the way like subway commuters at rush hour to see who could be raised up the highest. He saw the need to be powerful, the need to be in control, the need to be at the center of the universe. And he knows all that elbowing each other is just a way of saying you’re hungry. Hungry to feel valued. Hungry to be loved. So come to the table, he says, come to the feast. Come and be fed.

The table is round. There’s no higher place or lower place, no place of honor, no place of shame, and come with a humble heart, a heart ready to learn, a heart that isn’t anxious about status or recognition, a heart ready to love and be loved. There is plenty enough here for you and for everyone else too. Amen.