

"Faith Is An Open Circle"

Luke 14:1;7-14

I am proud to say that I was once the priest of a fine Episcopal Church whose slogan was not a theological statement like, "*A Christ-centered, Bible-Believing Church*" – nor was it a missional expression like, "*Reaching The World For Christ*" – nor was it even a functionary kind of description like, "*We Have The Best Choir in Town.*"

No, our unofficial slogan at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church was not anything at all like the rather refined jingles you encounter on the front-lawn signs of many churches across the country. Ours simply said, "*Where A Supper Is More Than A Meal...It's A Tradition!*"

Now it goes without saying that we were a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church where we reached out to others for Christ as we enjoyed the one of the best choirs in the area. But along with all that, we were an *eating* church. Pot-luck suppers. Fellowship meals. Ham and bean suppers with three different kinds of home baked beans, and cole slaw, and old Elsie Morris' German potato salad. Mmmm hmmm. The Harvest Supper with tender roast beef and gravy, mashed potatoes, winter squash, roasted corn and lots of other colorful Fall vegetables – all followed up with homemade apple pie. Mmmm hmmm.

Oh, theology is fine, but to tell you the truth, the essence of a church is located around the dinner table. And according to Luke the gospelwriter, some of the most significant moments in Jesus' ministry occurred at supper. That's probably why the central Sacrament of our faith occurs around a table. And, of course, that's where we're gathered today.

So I'm proud that our church was locally known as the place *where a supper is MORE than a meal...it's a tradition!*

In today's Scripture reading from Luke 14, Jesus is using a meal to teach us some important stuff about living the Christian life. There are really two parts to the teaching. In the first, the Lord gives us some proper etiquette to put to use at a wedding banquet. Now, Jay Leno also offers us some tips on wedding decorum. For instance, he says that waiting in line ten minutes to kiss the bride is good etiquette. On the other hand, *kissing* the bride for ten minutes is bad etiquette. Leno also notes that guests who place their gifts by the sign reading "*Gift Table*" are practicing good etiquette. But the groom who takes those gifts and puts them by the sign reading "*Yard Sale*" is practicing bad etiquette. *Very* bad etiquette.

But Jesus' advice to us is much simpler. He says that when you're invited to a wedding banquet, don't try to edge your way up front to the seats of honor, but rather take a seat in the back row. Jesus points out that this will avoid the embarrassment of sitting up there in

the front row when somebody more important comes along, discovers you sitting where the place holder with their name is, and has you forcibly removed. What a humbling experience that would be! And he also says that, if you take a seat way out in the bleachers, the host may well come along and say, “*Hey, come get a better seat!*” And that way, you’ll be exalted. And, of course, what Jesus is getting at here is that in God’s economy, those who try to exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Now the second part of Jesus’ teaching about banquet etiquette is rooted in middle eastern hospitality tradition. When you *give* a dinner, it is given as a gift. So don’t invite people of note or people of means. After all, they’ll just invite you to *their* homes in return, and pay you back. And that may be fun, but it’s not Christian hospitality. Rather, Jesus says, go out and invite the poor and the disabled – people who can’t repay you. Some day, he asserts, God will pay you back at the resurrection of the righteous.

Now at first glance, these may seem like small points of ancient etiquette that don’t seem to have much meaning and application to our lives. But wait. Let’s see if we can tie them together, and apply them to life here in our community and time.

I believe that Jesus is teaching that the biblical test of authentic faith – and really the way to joyful living - is not so much discovered in what you *receive, or achieve or even believe*. No, the true biblical test of authentic faith is found in *who you eat with!*

In the first case, going out to sit in the cheap seats is not only a good way to avoid the embarrassment of being kicked out of a place of honor by someone more important than you, but it’s a wonderful way to find yourself sitting among some of the people God most cherishes. People who hold little stature in the eyes of the world, but who are the apple of God’s eye!

And in the second case, inviting to your banquet people who are of such lowly means that they can never repay you, gives you the opportunity to become an instrument of God’s wonderful *grace!* To care for people who can’t care for you back, to feed someone who can’t repay, to help a person who cannot reciprocate is where *Christian* love begins.

And so as we draw near to the table today, Jesus directs our eyes *outward*. Not to the front, but to the back. Not to the places of note, but to the unnoticeable places. Note to the obvious, but to the hidden. And this little parable gives us two practical instructions about living the Christian life.

First, aim your life toward those living *outside* the circle of success, achievement and honor.

In one of the churches I served, we had a group whose name was *The Open Circle*. It was described as a close-knit fellowship of people – young and old, single and married, church members and non-members – who enjoyed being together as friends, and had a terrific program of activities. But one other feature of the group was what made it

distinctive. That was its sense that the group was a circle of people that never quite *closed*. There was always a space left open - a space where someone from the outside could be brought inside. In fact, the main purpose of that open circle was to *deliberately* draw near to folks who otherwise might be excluded. In other words, the practical purpose of that group was to go out and sit in the bleacher seats – just like Jesus said - so they could find people who just couldn't make it to the head table.

Following Jesus is like living in an open circle. You should always be looking for, and reaching out to, and embracing those who are out on the fringes – just like Jesus did.

It occurs to me that, even as we prepare to come to the God's Table today, there are some among us who may feel like outsiders. Someone feels lonely because they've just moved here and they don't know a soul. Someone else is painfully aware of the fact that this weekend is the one-year anniversary of her husband's death. There is someone here today who is estranged from God because of a relative's disability. There are many who have lost loved ones recently. There are several among us who wrestle with alcoholism. There are those who are filled with doubt. And the list is long of those facing surgery this week, or undergoing chemotherapy, or wrestling with a terrible family problem.

So what does Jesus say? As you come to the table today, make yourself aware of those who – for whatever reason – are living outside the circle of success, achievement and honor. You probably know someone who is going through such a time right now. So this morning come and take some bread, and drink some wine, and then go to that person today – or tomorrow – or this week. Tell them you love them. Send them a card. Pay them a visit. Include them in your life. Leave the head table, and go to where they are. Open the circle to let them in!

And then there's one more very practical instruction that comes out of all this dinner etiquette. Jesus says to go and reach out to those outside the circle, and when you do, don't ever have a thought of being repaid.

I once had a parishioner who was lost in the destructive throes of alcoholism. We fellow church members wept openly as we watched that illness destroy his life, and his most important relationships. Finally, the day came when he hit bottom and agreed to go into detox. Unfortunately the only local program available was at a private hospital and it was terribly expensive. He had no insurance coverage.

That was when our deacon of the parish and his wife approached me and said they would pay for the hospital stay. I was touched by their love and generosity, but was not so sure they understood the harsh realities that were present. There were no guarantees that the treatment would work. So I told them as honestly as I could that it was entirely possible their generosity would not produce any change in this young man's life. Their money might go right down the drain. They said they knew that. But they'd talked it over. And they wanted to do it anyway. So they did. It cost them seven thousand dollars.

And three days after completing the program, the young man was back drinking again.

Now, years later, there *was* a turnaround in this man's life, and today, he is a successful person who has become a noted leader in Alcoholics Anonymous. And I like to believe that the gift given years earlier had something to do with that.

But the point is that you sometimes don't get to see the results of your love. In today's parable, Jesus says we won't see the results of some of our work until our lives are over, and God tells us about it at the resurrection of the righteous.

You know, we hear ourselves saying it a lot. "*I became involved in a mission project and ended up getting more out of it than I ever put in. It was such a rewarding experience!*"

And that's okay – to give and to get something in return. But that is the most immature and elementary of all forms of Christian love. You don't get to the true *depth* of Christian love until the day you give and get nothing back – you love and get hated in return – you help only to be taken advantage of – you forgive only to be hurt again. And yet, you keep giving, and loving, and helping, and forgiving – trusting *God* for a result you may never see!

That deacon, of course, was a member of that church *where a supper is more than a meal...it's a tradition*. There are some things about the Christian life you can only learn around the supper table.