

John F. Carter

St. John's Episcopal Church

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A FEAST FOR THE LEAST

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show

hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have

entertained angels without knowing it.”

Think of a time when you were invited to a party. Imagine what you go through thinking about ... what to wear – the jacket or suit, the tie, the skirt or dress, the shoes – how you will fit in or not – etc. Staring into your closet, you come to the panicky conclusion that you have nothing suitable to wear. Your heart drops into your stomach at your hypothetical mortification. A privileged dilemma.

Now, having spent much of the ride to the party nattering about light topics in order to avoid the nervous feeling in your gut, you and your partner, spouse or friend arrive. Will you stack up? You enter the room and the cacophony of chatter overwhelms you. Your heart races, adrenaline pumps ... you aim for nonchalance as you look desperately for someone, anyone, you know. Just then the hostess comes to greet you and shakes your cold, sweaty palm. But with her warm greeting you start to breathe more easily.

Relaxing a little, you wander around your host's home to check out the dinner table. Curious, you look for a place card with your name on it. You find that your spouse is sitting at the opposite end of the table and you do not know anyone at your end. You peep around to see if anyone is looking as you consider swapping place cards ...

Most of the time we may give little thought to where we sit when we eat, but seating and "tabling" often have overt or hidden significance. As the scenario above illustrates, there is a certain tension around questions of seating. *"With whom am I going to eat? Which table do I prefer in the restaurant, the one at the back or the one right in the middle?"* Following the rules of etiquette sometimes puts us in places we'd really rather not be. The perennial social questions are; *"What's in and what's out; and who's in and who's out?"*

I understand that for children going back to school, *Toy Story 3* lunch boxes are "in" and that *X-Men* lunch boxes "are so last year". Gated communities make clear who's in and who's out. A few verses before today's gospel from Luke, the disciples ask the question, *"Lord, will only a few be saved?"* Will this be an exclusive group? Will I be "left behind"? In Jesus' time, it was believed that there would be a great a banquet at the end of the age.

At banquets in Korea, I was frequently seated next to a government official. Presumably this raised my status (while hopefully not lowering his). Korean homes were heated by charcoal briquettes under stone floors (Ondulpang). Because it is bitter cold in the winter, when a guest arrived, he or she was offered the hottest spot on the floor. This was an honor, though I broke a sweat on more than one occasion, wondering just what sort of honor this might be.

At the diplomatic level, seating may be especially touchy. At the 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea, there is a

table at Panmunjom with a line down the middle of it separating the two countries.

Commensality is an anthropological term that refers to patterns of seating and eating. It comes from the Latin words, *con* meaning “together” and *mensa* meaning “table”. *Together at table*. Commensality sees table fellowship as a map of economic discrimination, social hierarchy, and political differentiation. (*Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*.)

In the dining room at my childhood home, at suppertime, my older brother and I sat on one side of the table, our older sister on the opposite side, with my parents at the ends. I do not remember ever changing this arrangement. At the kitchen table things were more informal.

As a child, where did you sit at the dinner table? Were you comfortable there? Where did your parents sit? Did your siblings have regular places? What would have happened if someone had changed the chairs?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is a guest at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. He audaciously confronts first the guests and then the host. It is a Sabbath meal, a special feast. Because it is at the home of a prominent leader, we might expect many influential people to be there.

The Pharisees are watching Jesus closely, but he’s watching them even more closely, especially how the guests go about choosing the places of honor at the table. In his advocacy of the poor, we may hear a subtle response to the disciples’ earlier question, “Who will be saved?” He tells a parable:

“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; and the host who invited both of you come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ((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.))

Jesus' blunt words must have caused embarrassment and anger. Who is *he* to be telling people where to sit? Now he turns to his host. He says to him,

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed,"

Jesus overturns the tables of etiquette, but more importantly, he shows something about where empathy and compassion begin. Where would the Chilean miners sit at Jesus' table?

Jesus introduces a radically alternative social vision, inclusive commensality. He is talking about the kingdom of God in terms of a *completely* nondiscriminatory table. He is not interested in respectability or status. Most of us are, and so we might be tempted to write off his egalitarian challenge as naïve and idealistic.

Let us suppose for a moment that a poor person comes to your door asking for food. Would you give them money to buy food, offer them some leftovers from the fridge? Would you invite them in and prepare a meal for them? Would you ask them to join you in a family meal? Would you consider inviting them to a dinner party you're planning for next Saturday night? Jesus' teaching pushes beyond comfort zones and social norms. ((Giuliani story))

Often we value ourselves through the eyes of others. We know who we are by whom we associate with. We assess our self-worth by the company we keep. But the true worth of each of us and each of our neighbors of us is much deeper.

Two days ago, I heard an interview with a man and his wife on NPR's "Story Corps". Having worked as an astrophysicist all his professional life, the husband now has Alzheimer's disease and has completely lost his short-term memory. He cannot remember what he did ten minutes ago. Having relied upon his brain all his life, he now states unequivocally that it is not the brain but the human heart that is the essence of life. What do we have to lose or surrender to understand this wisdom? He chokes up as he speaks of his love for his grandchild. For him, the greatest seat of honor at any meal is the chair next to the highchair that holds this grandson.

The church is one place where the intention of open table fellowship becomes real. The Holy Eucharist, God's banquet for all people: it does not matter who kneels or stands next to us. At the communion table, *all* places are places of honor.

Here is where a vision is implanted within our hearts (it is already there) that we may take to take to our homes, work places ... or to the next party.

Luke 14:1-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" ⁴But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵Then he said to them, "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?”⁶ And they could not reply to this.

⁷When 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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He 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 or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”