

28-Aug-2016 Sermon

Dining with Jesus

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In the first part of today's Gospel reading we discover what some of have believed for some time, namely, that Jesus was actually from the American Midwest. Good advice about not be too full of yourself in public. Let's bring it up to date, shall we? "When you bring your casserole to the church covered dish, don't be bragging about how delicious it is or what a great cook you are. Don't be getting too big for your britches! And if pastor Nordquist takes a sample of your tater tot cheddar cheese hamburger casserole—the one with the Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup in it—well, if pastor Nordquist takes a bit and praises it, just remember: he does that to *everyone's* hotdish."

Good advice. Let others honor you.

There is a fellowship of the table, a deep human-to-human bonding around the breaking of bread. Meals were the center of Jewish home spirituality because the Jews understood that the one who eat with is closer than a brother or a sister. "I have earnestly desired to eat this meal with you," Jesus tells His disciples at the Last Supper, "for I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Lk 22:15-16).

The second part of today's Gospel reading is not quite so reassuring, in terms of advice about banquets. "When you give a dinner," Jesus advises, "do not invite your friends or your relatives. But instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...."

That's a tough saying. That's a saying that we *wish* came easier to us. We *wish* Jesus had said, "When you give a dinner, invite at least one person who is not in your ordinary circle of friends." We *wish* Jesus had said, at dinner, put the in-law you like the least next to you and try to say at least one thing kind to them. We *wish* Jesus had said, "just try to be nicer."

But He didn't. He said, "When you a give a dinner, do not invite your friends. Or your in-laws. Invite the people who are the ones you have the most difficult time with: the man on the bench near Safeway smoking a cigarette and talking to himself, the woman in the nursing home whom no one visits, the family that has domestic violence issues.

The sayings of Jesus—and really, the whole Bible—is not like a buffet where we can pick and choose what we want to keep. "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy—burdened." "Ooh, I like that one." "I will be with you, even to the end of the age." "I like that one, too." "When you give a dinner, don't invite your friends or your relatives." "I think I'll pass on that one."

Like it or not, the Bible is more like picking out a spouse. You don't get to say, "I like his smile, but he's a little short. I'll take the smile but not his height." But the smile and the height are a package deal, along with the rest of him.

So we're stuck with this tough saying.

Nor is the Bible an answer book. It's a question book. Questions from God. So, with this passage, what's the question? Well, I'll tell you, the question we're terrified of, is the question, "WHY AREN'T YOU LIVING FOR OTHERS? Others need you. Others are not as well off as you. Why aren't you living for them?"

But I don't think that's the right question. It's not the mission of Jesus to convert us to card-carrying altruists. It's a color, but it's not the whole painting. It's a question, and questions are in the realm of Jesus; it's about service, and service is in the realm of Jesus; and it's laden with emotion, and emotion is in the realm of Jesus. But it's fundamentally a question about time and a question about friendship, and those are things we don't understand as well as we *think* we do.

No, I think the real question in this passage is, "Why are you still eating alone?" "Why are you still eating alone?"

Now, I'm not talking about the number of people around your dinner table, whether you're alone, or with one other person or ten other people. Everyone in this room knows that you can have ten other people who love you around your table and still eat alone. We're all such terribly, terribly lonely people.

Last time I preached, it was on the subject of busyness. I said that God may not think that busyness is a good use of our time. I said that what people call busyness, God calls sloth. After the sermon, at the door, someone told me, "Thank you for your message. I can't wait to go home and *do nothing*." Well, that wasn't *exactly* what I intended to say, but it does raise the question, if we aren't going to spend our time being busy, then what are we going to do? It's a little embarrassing at this age of our lives to be asking this question, but, how *are* we going to spend our time?

One great way is to eat. I mean eating with Jesus. I'm talking about engaging in the deepest act of friendship, of sharing bread, of communicating. Of being renewed together. When He asks, "Why are you still eating alone?" He's asking us, why are you holding back from me? Why not enjoy a meal together. We Jews love to eat—come eat with me.

I find it encouraging that at the end of the Bible there is a wedding supper, that alongside the description of the final battle between good and evil, between the rider on the white horse and his army on one side, and the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies on the other side, is the description of the great supper of God, the wedding supper of Christ and His people, when every tear has been wiped away, and death has passed forever and there *is* no more mourning or crying or pain. That instead of suffering, there is hotdish. That instead of enmity there is passing of dishes from one person to their neighbor. "Try this one; it's delicious. This one, not so much. It's some godawful tater tot cheddar cheese hamburger concoction, with a whole lot of Cream of Mushroom soup in it.

In fact, when we look at the gospels, we discover an unusual fact: Jesus liked to eat! The very God, very man—the One in whom the fullness of eternal deity existed—He liked to eat! Many of the stories about Jesus are stories about meals. "Hey, Zacchaeus, what are you doing up in that tree? Why not invite me to dinner?" "Hey, Mr. Pharisee—I don't care for your theology but I sure like your wife's cooking." "Martha, I wish you weren't so busy, but... what is that great aroma I smell?" Jesus Himself says that He is accused of being a glutton.

How about the wedding in Cana. There were six jars of water that Jesus turned to wine—each held 20-30 gallons. That means Jesus made at least 120 gallons of wine. At five bottles per gallon, that's at least 600 bottles of wine. How many people do you think were at this wedding?

And it's not *just wine*. Jesus knows what He's doing. He makes the *good stuff*. He makes the wedding host *glad* he invited Him to the wedding.

And then—after the resurrection! Does a resurrected body need to eat? I don't think so. But there is Jesus—the disciples are working hard at the nets in the boat and there's Jesus on the shore—“Yoo-hoo! We've got a fish fry going here! Who wants fish!” Jesus loves to share a meal with people.

There was a painting in the church I grew up in—perhaps you've seen it—with Jesus knocking at a door. It's based on a verse in the book of Revelation, namely, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Rev 3:20). We think about Jesus knocking at the door in terms of the call to salvation. But it also means that He'd like to come in and eat. Jesus is hungry.

At each meal, remember that Jesus is knocking. Dinner time—Jesus is knocking. Invite Him in. Tell him what you liked about the day; what was rough. Remember something with him. Or maybe dinner is too hectic—too many people, too difficult for you to be anything *but* alone. So, after dinner, invite Jesus for a glass of wine—or Seven-up if you prefer.

Get used to talking to someone you don't see. Remember that Jimmy Stewart movie, *Harvey*, where he spent the movie talking to an invisible rabbit? Well, it's not like that. Here you're speaking to Jesus, who is definitely present. He is the One who says He *longs* to have this meal with you. You may be speaking in English, but you're also speaking in a spiritual language and He is hearing every word.

Lunch time. Jesus at the door. Do I open it? Why not? Why am I so busy? An extra five minutes is fine. Talk to Jesus about anything. Tell Him thanks. Tell Him a joke. Get used to verbal friendship with a Jesus you cannot see, but who is assuredly very present.

And eventually you will hear the voice of Jesus to you. I don't know what it will sound like. It may sound like a deacon's voice or a priest's voice or a warden's voice or a friend's voice. You may—spiritually—see Jesus' lips moving but you'll swear He sounds a lot like Carol Rodin. And He'll start to talk about a party He wants you to throw. Something you can certainly do. And let's not invite the regular old crowd—we can invite them *any* time. But this time, let's invite the down-and-outers. So He says, “Brian, how about we throw a party? You do the work and I'll show up. Let's invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And the deaf. And you know who will be first on the invite list? *You*.” “Jesus, I'm not poor or crippled or lame or blind or deaf. Unless you count people who don't listen very well as deaf. Oh, I see. You do.”

And it won't feel like someone is shouting at you, saying, “When will you start living for others?” because you'll realize that this is *Jesus'* banquet. That He wants *you* to be plan it, but it's really *His* banquet. We know that from this passage because at the end He says that we'll be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, namely, at the end of time, which *He* owns. That this banquet is just an extension of the many, many times when *we've* eaten with Jesus. When our loneliness has been eased. That this is, like that wedding banquet at the end of time, *His* banquet. So it doesn't

feel overwhelming to invite the poor, the crippled—even those of us who are bad listeners—because we're so comfortable now with Jesus.

And after we rise from our meal with Jesus, we'll be refreshed. We'll be strengthened. We'll be ready for the changes and the chances of this world. We'll walk in power because we know that it's only a short while, only a little while, before we'll hear that knock on the door, and we'll open it and invite Him in, He who loves to eat with us, He who loves to hear us, and He who—even though we cannot see him or hear Him speaking—is more real than any of our troubles and whose love and affection are deeper than our loneliness.