Sermon for The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 1, 2019
Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14
Title: Table setting

In urban and suburban 21st-century America, we tend to think of ourselves as fairly evolved people - people not necessarily bound by custom, tradition, and taboo. But if we reflect thoughtfully on all the unspoken norms that govern our common meals, we might think twice about that. The silverware is placed in a certain order. The glasses and plates arranged just so. There’s a polite way to choose a seat - no one enters another person’s home on Thanksgiving and plops down at the head of the table – and to take your seat: how to scoot in, and, depending on your gender and age, whom to assist. The napkin goes in the lap, not the collar. Maybe there’s a prayer, or the clinking of glasses. We don’t chew with our mouths open. The use of fingers is circumspect. No to elbows on the table. Yes to passing the rolls. No to talking with food in your mouth. Yes to pouring the wine. No to reaching across the table. Yes to complimenting the chef. No to critiquing the chef.

But where did all this come from, and does it really matter? After all, my sister-in-law, born and raised in Pakistan, doesn’t mean to invade my space when she heaps seconds on my plate, uninvited, uninterested in my protests. She’s just showing her love in a manner entirely appropriate for her context. And my four-year-old doesn’t mean to be rude when she puts her elbows on the table. She’s just getting into a better position to steal my steak. The norms at table differ from country to country, culture to culture, region to region, family to family, and until someone breaks one, we are often blissfully unaware of our expectations – even our deeply held expectations.

On one level, today’s Gospel seems to address some rather mundane details of ancient meal-time propriety. But, as he so often does, Jesus is using the everyday and ordinary stuff of life to make a rather profound point. Jesus has joined a group for a meal at the home of a leading Pharisee, meaning this particular host is likely to be extremely concerned with the rules. Moreover, it’s the Sabbath, when there are even more rules for Jews to observe, not unlike how there are more complex rituals at play for us at Christmas dinner or Easter brunch. Jesus watches everyone take their seat, then tells them a parable about a wedding banquet. He tells the guests
not to presume they belong in a seat of honor, lest someone more important, more connected, closer to the family, shows up late – as apparently happened in those days, though never here in contemporary California – and the host has to ask you to move. It’s much better, he says, to take the lowest place and be asked to move higher, move closer, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus also has some advice for those throwing parties, urging them not to invite their family, friends, and rich neighbors, but those most in need and most likely to be left out: “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” for they cannot repay the kindness, and in that act of selfless generosity, there will be a blessing.

The often unspoken, even unconscious, rules that govern our time at table do matter, because they reveal something of our often unspoken, even unconscious, beliefs about who we are and how we are called to be in relationship with one another. Like that a father or husband belongs not only at the head of the table but the head of the family. Or that women need help with even the smallest of things. Or that that children belong at a separate table, if not in a separate room. Or that there is something fundamentally more refined about using silverware. Or that you must present yourself clean, shaved, pressed, clipped, fresh, and shiny, to deserve your seat at the table. To earn your place.

And while, yes, some of this can cause cognitive dissonance for us in contemporary California, because the head of the family might be the wife, or one of the wives; or a feminine member of the family might be a board-certified neurosurgeon or CEO and, therefore, capable of scooting in their chair (though – no judgement – it’s possible she might still find it touching when her partner goes through the effort). But cognitive dissonance notwithstanding, this stuff is still in many of us. I’m not sure we can help it, or even if we could if that would be a good thing. We’re creatures of culture as much as we are creatures of flesh and blood and bone, and cultures tell us – for better or for worse – a whole lot about what it means to be human and how to get along, or ignore, or debase, or delight in those around us. So maybe in all the details about propriety and table manners, Jesus is saying something about pride and humility, hospitality and generosity; about undeserved grace and unexpected honor. Mostly, though, as he methodically turns cultural expectations on their heads, he seems to be lifting up the thread that through today’s lessons affirming our common humanity and our common dignity as children of God.
In 1964, a young French-Canadian man named Jean Vanier, traveled to a friend in Paris who worked at an asylum for men with severe intellectual disabilities, which he soon visited. The 80+ patients institutionalized there spent their entire day walking in a circle, with breaks for meals and a two-hour mandatory nap. The conditions were heartbreaking. The atmosphere was bleak. Vanier was a devoted Catholic and a man of deep prayer, and he was profoundly shaken by what he saw. His spiritual mentor encouraged him to “do something” with this distress. My guess is that if many of us got similar, practical advice, we’d make a generous donation to a non-profit working with a diversely abled community, read up on the issue, vote for politicians who seemed to care, and so on. And who knows? Maybe that’s what he figured he’d do … at first, at least. But, apparently, this distress wasn’t so easily shaken, because just a year later he bought a house near the asylum and invited two of the men living there to move in with him. Soon he invited more friends, with a wide spectrum of intellectual and developmental capacities, to join their makeshift family, and the first L’Arche community was born.

Vanier was not interested in running an institution. Rather, he was committed to cultivating a community which placed the needs and care of the most vulnerable members at the center of their common life. Forget showing up clean, presentable, shaved, pressed, clipped, fresh, and shiny. Forget deserving your place at the table, or in the house, or in community. Forget earning your honor and dignity entirely. Vanier enthusiastically welcomed guests and visitors to his home, where people invariably found a depth of joy, a shock of hope, and the palpable, playful, presence of the Spirit.

Today, there are 147 L’Arche communities in 35 countries on five different continents. I’ve had the great joy of visiting three such communities on three different continents, and have found in each a wonderful example of this subversive and surprising love. Henri Nouwen, theologian and author of numerous bestselling books, including “The Wounded Healer,” retired from teaching at Yale Divinity School in 1986 to live at Daybreak, a L’Arche community in Ontario. In his words, "L'Arche exists not to help the mentally handicapped get 'normal,' but to help them share their spiritual gifts with the world."¹ It turns out there is a higher calling than being normal - being clean, presentable, shaved, pressed, clipped – and that is being fully human. Living into our belovedness, because God’s favor and God’s grace are never in question and

there is nothing in the world we need to do to earn them, just like there’s nothing in the world we could do to lose them.

Now, this is good news. Great news. But Jesus’ is basically the opposite of polite this morning. He actually turns to his host – remember, he is a guest here – at the holiday meal, of all times! – and chooses this moment to tell him how to host a more faithful brunch: invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind (and maybe a little lighter on the avocado toast, though Luke redacted that part). It’s good news – but it might just offend our sense of propriety. It’s good news, but it may not be welcome news. And Jesus is saying that in those moments – when what is right and what is easy butt up against each other – we must be prepared to choose the right. It will not always feel like a welcome invitation. It might rub the wrong way. Go against the grain. And it might mean we are called to go out and inflict that same discomfort on others – alas. But so it goes. This seems to be part of how God is remaking the world.

Fr. Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries, widely celebrated for his ministry amongst gang members in the heart of Los Angeles. Early in his call at Mission Dolores, a local reporter visited to interview him and some of the young people he’d employed, housed, baptized, and otherwise companioned. At one point while doing a group interview, the journalist kept repeating, incredulously, that he couldn’t believe Fr. Greg was not going to turn them in to the police. Them – known gang members! Truants! Criminals! He asked one of the young men directly about this, saying, “why won’t he turn you in?” almost desperately. And the young man – so recently in prison, now employed, supporting his younger siblings, paying rent, having had all of his tattoos removed, sitting around the table enjoying the feast - actually paused to think about it seriously before saying, “God, I guess.”

The good news is not simply that we’ve made the guest list to God’s dinner party - though we have, and good news. The good news is also a reminder that there are others in this world who God longs to celebrate with – and longs for us to celebrate with - who have not yet been invited – who have been left out, forgotten, derided, unwelcome; whose needs have not yet been considered and whose gifts we are the poorer for not receiving. This is God’s dinner party. The rest is musical chairs, and we have very clear instructions for how to play. We might just give it a try – like Vanier, and Fr. Greg, and countless other everyday saints. And when we do,

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2 You can read the fuller version of this story, and many more, in Fr. Greg’s New York Times Bestselling Book, Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion.
we might be surprised to find we don’t need to wait until the resurrection to receive the blessing. It’s actually the main course. Amen.