

An Invitation
Luke 14:12-14

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Today we are beginning a summer series that explores the Lord's Table – from practices ancient and modern. We will reflect on communion and how it continues to shape our faith community and personal lives today.

I want to recommend a summer book for you. Mike Graves is a Disciples pastor and professor and he has written a very engaging book entitled, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion and Community* (Chalice, 2017). I believe that if you spend time with it – either individually or in a small group – it can grow and strengthen your faith. In fact, we asked Mike to come be our special guest preacher to close the series and he agreed! He will be with us on August 5. I hope you can join us and bring friends.

I have a friend and pastor by the name of name of James Brooks. He pastors a congregation in Illinois. James is on sabbatical now and is making the pilgrimage on the Camino in northern Spain.

I follow his daily blog. In a recent blog post he described how he arrived at Grañon and stayed at and took his meals in the now famous hostile shown in the film *The Way* with Martin Sheen.

James described the camaraderie that forms among the pilgrims – which I confirmed with Taby, who walked the Camino in 2015. A new kind of temporary highly charged community is formed. Let me share a portion of his post with you:

“At 6pm all the pilgrims cooked dinner under guidance of the two hosts. At 7pm, we were told we would need to sing for our food. A story was told of not having money so we would serenade the baker woman. There were 17 in our group and no common language. We did agree to sing “Imagine” by John Lennon. Two of our group played guitar and we had lyrics on our phones. Then off we go into the street to the bakery. We take turns singing. Then the baker woman starts demanding various nationalities sing. I rounded up the two Americans I recognized and we huddled to prepare.

Thankfully time ran out before we could sing *Take Me Out to the Ballpark*.

At 8pm we gathered round a common table. I was asked to say the blessing. Dinner was bread from the baker woman, a salad full of fresh veggies we had cut, and a soup with sausage and beans. Dessert was an apple crisp.

After washing up we went to the choir loft of the church. We had evening prayers and pilgrim sharing." (*Sacred Stirrings*, June 5, 2018)

We may never walk the Camino or we might. We might be part of a different kind of pilgrimage, a shorter one, traveling to a retreat maybe. It might be a pilgrimage to a grave or a graduation or a birth. And whatever pilgrimage we share we may find our lives intertwined with the deep experiences of other pilgrims. We may find something the soul needed. We may find it by sharing it with other pilgrims, those with whom we have bonded.

The most obvious spiritual pilgrimage many of us make on a regular basis is the pilgrimage to worship. We travel our own Camino to a sacred place where thousands have traveled before. And in our tradition, at least, that pilgrimage always winds up at a table, like James did in Grañon. We prepare the table, we ask for bread, we break it and give thanks, we share it with glad and generous hearts. We are pilgrims making a table stop along the way, a stop for rest, renewal and refreshment. We are people of the table.

Of course, for Disciples the table is not only the center of our worship but the center of our *identity* – it holds who we are and whose we are.

It may seem silly but we really *are what we eat*. What's more we are *who we eat with*. And we are *how we eat*.

To explore this more deeply there is only one place to begin, with Jesus himself. And I mean before the last supper and the richness that brings.

We have to explore Jesus at table, which in the Gospels seems to be all the time. In Robert Karris's now famous statement about Jesus and the table in Luke's Gospel he writes, "Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal (*Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel*, 14)." It's true. I dare you to pick up the Gospel of Luke and look for all the Jesus meals.

One question: What does Jesus do and say at these meals and with whom? Another thing we can do is compare the Jesus meals with other meals and banquets of the time and notice the difference, and there are big ones.

Jesus eats with everybody. He eats with religious people. He eats at parties and banquets. He eats with friends. He eats with all manner of social outcasts. He eats bread and fish with thousands of poor people on a hillside.

He uses these meals as teachable moments, often when people ask him questions. He often replies with a wisdom teaching or a parable.

In some cases, like the Pharisee who criticized him for allowing the sinful woman to wash his feet, he gets testy, telling him that the woman he condemns is infinitely closer to the kingdom than he ever imagined being. All this takes place around the table.

In the main, compared to other meals and banquets of the time, Jesus' meals broke down barriers. In fact he was assigned a nickname by his adversaries. If they tweeted back then this is what they would tweet: "He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Lk 7:34) Of course, Jesus wore that moniker like a badge of honor.

The text we have before us this morning is from one of those meals in Luke. This time Jesus is eating with religious people, Pharisees. They are watching him like a hawk. When a sick man seeks healing Jesus turns it into a question, "Is it legal to heal on the Sabbath?" (He asks because healing represents work, which must be avoided) Then he healed the man, demonstrating that compassion is always more important than tradition.

When he noticed that all the guests were all jockeying for places of honor at the meal he suggested they should choose the lowest, the humblest place. And then he shared the words that jolted everyone the most:

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

This of course challenges not only the Pharisees of Jesus' day but Christians of every day: Who is invited to the table? The answer is straight forward – the people who can't give you anything in return, the ones who cannot return the favor.

Meals in Greco-Roman culture were most often designed to accentuate social groupings of social status. Jesus was re-defining this in a very unconventional and uncomfortable way. And of course that challenges us in uncomfortable ways: Jesus never turns anyone away from his meals.

When I interpret scripture one of the questions I always ask is "Where are you when you read it?" In other words, where are you standing when you hear the words? They sound different, speak differently, depending.

The words sound one way when we hear them in our homes:

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

My home is my refuge, the place where I rest, renew, recover and heal. My home is full of protection. My home is the place I might retreat. But Jesus says words that ring strangely when I stand in my home. Who do I invite to dinner? Like those living with those Greco-Roman norms, I feel uncomfortable with the way Jesus puts it. How does my table change or need to change?

We expect these kinds of words we are helping at Room at the Inn or a benevolent ministry, some

place where we have the power to help someone who has hardly any.

But the words sound entirely different when we hear them out among our friends, out with our business associates, at the country club, the tailgate, my service club, Thanksgiving dinner, stepping over the homeless person on the sidewalk outside the restaurant we're about to enter, the Church pot luck supper:

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

How jarring they sound in these places, words out of place, words out of sync, lost words trying to find a home.

When I was in college I worked in my home church as a part-time custodian. You would call that "working your way up." In addition to all else I would do the set ups for the CWF, these women who were my grandmother's age.

I wondered how anyone could stand the boredom of it all. But I was polite and they fed me and that's no small thing for a college student scraping by. I always noticed that there was one woman who was out of place with the rest. She had a sad expression that was more than sad and she always looked a little disoriented. She wore the same wool suit every time and it was spotted and stained and she didn't smell good. I found out later that she pretty much lived on the streets where our downtown church was located. Some of the women would check in on her from time to time. And on the third Thursday of every month she sat at table with them.

These words of Jesus sound very different when I read them in that room, that place and with those people. Though I didn't know it at the time, those women were teaching me what the words meant. They *were* the curriculum of the church.

The words sound so very different when they are spoken on the Camino with pilgrims singing for their supper at the bakery on the Way.

And they sound different when you read them at a bakery in Colorado when a gay couple asks you to bake their wedding cake for you.

When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you ...

I imagine Jesus saying these words to the baker behind the counter who refused to help on religious grounds.

And then I imagine Jesus behind the counter, the Jesus who ate with everybody, the friend of tax collectors and sinners, the people at the center and at the edges, seizing every teachable moment and telling his parables about wedding banquets where the privileged seem too busy to attend so the outcasts were invited and came in because they knew their need of God, a prodigal son who finally made it home after he bottomed out and they threw a banquet for him. I see this Jesus with an apron around his waist and flour on his hands. I hear them asking him if he will bake a cake for them.

The words sound so different, depending on where you are standing.

And the words sound different here, behind this table, don't they? We see his hands hold up the bread and break it and invite all who are hungry to feast with him. Come as you are, he says. There is enough for everyone. There's room at the table. Come not thinking you can repay anything. This is a gift. Like the thousands on the hillside sharing bread and fish, or among the religious who are always parsing who is in or out, or people who can barely drag themselves in because life has beat them down.

Wherever you stand, those are the ones who are invited to the kingdom meals of Jesus.