



Meals are often times for discussion about current events. “How was your day” or “how was school today” are often how the discussion starts. Meals can be a chance to sit together with your family and friends in a safe environment for a few quiet minutes after the work for the day is done. It is a time to reconnect after time apart.

After all the stories in the Gospels about Jesus eating at the homes of Pharisees and other leaders- and during the meal upsetting normal customs and expectations,- you would think

that word had gotten around. “Don't invite Jesus- it won't be a pleasant meal. He will do and say the strangest things! And, some of your other guests will be upset.” Better by far to steer clear of asking Jesus to your house for dinner unless you need a little shock value to keep everybody talking.

Jesus, once again, does the unexpected. First, he accepts the invitation to eat with those he knows oppose –or at least don't support- his ministry and his understanding of what God is doing in the world. Second, he doesn't support the norms: when you throw a dinner party, it reflects well on you if important people accept your invitation and sit next to the host- showing the importance by where you are seated. Each one of us has probably been to a dinner or other social event where place cards dictate where we sit: how close to the front table or the importance of the other people seated at the same table with us. Think of the “head table” at awards banquets or weddings.

There is a whole group of people whose job is to determine who sits next to whom- who sits closest to the host- what gifts are given to whom, what is served at an official function. The Chief of Protocol functions within the US State Department and holds the rank of Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State. In today's secular world, the Chief of Protocol helps diplomatic relations flow smoothly. In some ways, the Chief of Protocol is analogous to the Parliamentarian during Diocesan Convention: a person whose function is to help discussion occur in ways that promote the discussion of differing points of view and keep us from descending into shouting matches. God's realm, though, doesn't need a Chief of Protocol or a Parliamentarian– or at least the rules of engagement for such a function are turned on their head in God's realm.

Invite those who can do nothing for you, Jesus says. Do not ask those who will repay you by reciprocating hospitality. Look out for the poor, those in prison, those being tortured, and the hungry. Sit at the seat farthest from the host rather than the one closest. Be open to new table companions. We have a tendency to choose the same seat at the table each time. It's comfortable. It's safe. And for those of us who are left-handed, it avoids bumping elbows!

I wonder if that's why so many sit in the furthest back pews. I cordially invite all of you to move to the front!

What bothers me about the notion of deliberately sitting at a "lowly" seat so that you can be invited to move forward is that it smacks of manipulating the system. Won't others be jealous when the host picks me out and asks me to move closer? Certainly not what Jesus means. But what does he mean? Perhaps Jesus means for us to understand that we are each created by the God who loves us. No one of us is more important than any other. We need to offer hospitality to all, regardless of our status or the lack of status in our secular world.

Hospitality is desirable and is to be offered at all times. Hospitality is the friendly and generous reception of guests, visitors and strangers. Hospitality is to be offered to those we do not know as well as to those we do know. Hospitality is a frame of mind as well as outward action. It is acknowledging the Christ in each of us. It is seeking a way to be a blessing to each person we meet. Welcome to your table all those in need. Hospitality also encompasses honoring the norms of the society or the family or the company in which you find yourself. Honor the boundaries of "good behavior" which exist, after all, to help us get along by knowing what is expected of us. This doesn't ask us to be automatons with no thoughts in our head or no willingness to challenge the status quo when that is needed. Certainly Jesus challenged the status quo over and over again. With the exception of overturning the tables in the Temple, Jesus did so through word and example- not through violence.

God values each life. God doesn't judge us by what material possessions we have. Rather, God asks that we live out the values of love and justice and peace. God tells us to recognize the inherent spark of the divine that is in each person. Whether we like them or not- whether we agree or not- each person is created in the likeness and image of God. Therefore, every person- whether we like them or not- whether we can truly understand their life choices or not- is worthy of love and respect as someone created by God.

The way we live- the values we evidence through how we live and move and have our being- says more about how we understand ourselves and our place in God's realm than a privileged place at a banquet. Our charge is to live a life that imitates Christ- the Christ that is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. While our understanding of whom Christ is and how we are to respond may change as we grow and mature, the essence of Christ is the same.

Just as we view Mt. McKinley, now officially known by its Native name of Denali – we view Denali differently depending upon whether we are at ground level or at 7,000 ft., or whether we are looking at it from the north or the south. Whatever our perspective, it is still Denali. Our perspective has changed- not the mountain.

It's all too human to want to bask in reflected glory. "Keeping up with the Jones's" is all about having one's focus on money and material things-not on the things of God. Not on relationships that build up one another.

We preen- inwardly or outwardly- when we think others recognize our importance. Our walls become places to hang the trophies and plaques that tell the world: "Look, I'm important."

Jesus cautions us against this mindset when he admonishes us to free from the love of money. “Where is your focus- or where are your priorities?” he is really asking.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it more simply: “Rather, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” There's nothing wrong with money, per se. There's nothing wrong with inviting friends and family to dinner. The key question, though, is what is driving the invitation to dinner and have we left out someone who could use a good meal? There's nothing wrong with a nice house or a reliable car. The key question is whether we bought the house to be a safe refuge or to show off our worldly success. Hebrews tell us what God wants: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Motives matter. Actions matter. Words that do not match or motives or our actions are not pleasing to God.

As long as we realize that all that we have comes from God, and that God asks only that we return 10% - a Biblical tithe- to God- we can deploy our resources to support a safe and comfortable life. God asks that we use our resources prudently and respectfully, honoring God's creation. God wants us to continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God-that our lips confess His name.

Where are your priorities? Do you continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God? What's holding you back? Amen.