

Eating with Jesus

Sermon Luke 14:1, 7-14

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In 1988 when we first arrived in Egypt, a problem for me, spoiled young man from wealthy Holland, was that there was not a great variety of food in the shops.

We went to supermarkets where shelf after shelf would be filled with one type of jam. And shelves for only one type of shampoo. No choice.

For buying sugar and chicken and oil we needed government-issued coupons, to buy those goods in the government shops, the *gam3eya*. As foreigners we did not get those coupons so we needed the help of kind Egyptians to buy basic things like sugar.

I remember sometimes driving my car to Port Said to buy canned fruits, from the free market there. It was not for sale in Cairo. Well, times have changed.

Food is important for most of us, is it not?

I am very jealous of people who can eat and drink as much as they like, and it does not influence their shape.

I love eating and drinking, but sadly it DOES impact badly on the circumference of my abdominal parts. So I must always be careful...

Don't you love good food and dinners with family and friends? Eating together is a great way of celebrating community.

No wonder the church also celebrates the fellowship of the believers with a meal. With bread and wine. In the early church this celebration of the Eucharist was part of a real meal. The Christians were having diners together.

In the Bible, we often read of Jesus eating with people, and He used those times of joy and relaxation for teaching about the Kingdom of God.

1. Jesus at diner

We have read just now an interesting description of a dinner Jesus was invited to. Jesus was at a dinner party of a prominent Pharisee. That man belonged to that rigidly legalistic group of theologians.

Jesus' behavior at this meal was particularly interesting because he was harshly rebuking both the host who invited him, and also the guests.

That was not what we would consider polite – but it was not a time for politeness. Jesus was on his last trip to Jerusalem, and murder was in the air. His murder.

At this particular dinner party, Jesus was NOT invited because the religious leaders of Israel enjoyed his company, but He was invited in order for them to find fault in him. Luke says that Jesus was being carefully watched.

Just imagine that you are at a party, and everyone is looking your way the whole time,
whether you make mistakes;
whether you behave well;
whether you use knife and fork well;
whether what you say is ok.

The first thing that happened during this dinner party on this Sabbath day, was that Jesus healed a sick person, just as he did on one of the previous Sabbaths. Jesus did it again - he healed a man – on the Sabbath, even though the Pharisees considered this haraam – taboo.

The atmosphere must have been electric and very difficult for Jesus. He knew many hated him, and that he was only there because his enemies wanted to trick him into words and deeds for which he could be punished.

His enemies were doing their utmost to find reasons to get him out of the way. Jesus only had some more months to live. In this tense atmosphere he taught some important lessons – important for us today.

Jesus' first comment was regarding how the guests had picked their places at the dinner table. They chose the most honorable places.

In those days, people would be seated on couches that were made for three people. In you had, for instance, 21 guests, you needed 7 of those couches.

Those couches would then be arranged in a U shape. In the center of the U-shape was the food on low tables.

The central place was in the curve of the U, where the host would be seated. The next most honorable places would be left and right of him. The least honorable places would be the seats farthest away.

2. Lessons in humility

What did the guests at the party do? As soon as the time for being seated had come, they scrambled to get the best seats, closest to the host – because he was an important man.

How embarrassing. If you have ever been involved in organizing a dinner party, for instance at a wedding, than you know how complicated it is to arrange all people well.

We honor people by having them at the table of the host, and we can spend much time deciding who sits exactly opposite to the host, left and right. You cannot put people together at one table if they are not on speaking terms. Table-seatings... that can be a tremendous headache ...

But the guests at this party where Jesus was, did not care a bit and they scrambled for the best, honorable, places.

The host, this leading Pharisee, must actually have felt quite upset about their rude behavior. Or did he enjoy it, as it showed that people valued sitting close to him?

Jesus tells a parable that makes clear how rude and wrong the attitude of these people was. He tells of a wedding where people seat themselves at places that are meant for guests of honor, and so the leader of the feast goes to them and tells them to take another, less honorable seat.

It is much better, Jesus says, to take a more humble seat, and then be invited by the host: come please, and sit at my table! A humble attitude pays off!

Just as it is wiser to not voice your strong opinion about Jesus who should not heal on a sabbath - as He will have to put you down. Better have a humble attitude in life.

The people at the party with Jesus were probably mostly other Pharisees, and it is very surprising that these religious people had to be taught this lesson by Jesus. They all knew the wise advice of Proverbs 25:6-7

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of the prince.

The key statement of Jesus is verse 11. He explains why their behavior is so appalling in the eyes of God:

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is his critique of those Pharisees trying to get the best places, and thinking of themselves only. And it is his critique of the Pharisees caring more for their animals than for a sick person who needs healing. Think of other people and their needs first. Put yourself last.

People who exalt themselves usually do that at the expense of others – like at the diner party Jesus attended. 'I want the better seat, let the other guys sit at the lower seats. I am entitled to good treatment. I have my rights. I am important. I do not allow others to walk all over me...'

With his comments, Jesus takes the behavior at the diner, a temporary issue, to the height of eternal matters: He gives us a precious Kingdom rule:

God rewards humility and a servant attitude – maybe not in this life, but certainly in the life to come. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth...

Humility and serving others is not that you allow others to walk over you, and it is also not the same as feeling that you are a worm. It is not feeling bad about yourself, or having a low opinion of yourself, or thinking of yourself as inferior to others.

A humble person makes a realistic assessment of himself without illusion or pretense to be something he is not. He regards himself neither smaller nor larger than he truly is. He does not mind to help other people, as he does not have his own interests in front of him.

Humility frees us to be ourselves and to focus on the well-being of others, to love them and to serve them selflessly, for their sake, rather than for our own benefit.

This attitude of humble servanthood liberates us from being preoccupied with ourselves and our own goals all day. We do not have to wear a mask or put on a facade in order to look good to others.

But then came the second important lesson from Jesus, now directed at the host of the party. Jesus also criticizes him: He criticizes him for the types of guests he had invited.

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.

What did Jesus tell the man?

Do not only organize parties for your friends who may invite you in return. Think of the poor, the paupers, the lame, the crippled. People who do not have money to throw parties and eat well, and who can not invite you back.

The host maybe thought that his guests were rude for only thinking about themselves, scrambling for the best seats – but Jesus tells the man that his own attitude is also problematic. He only thought of his own interests – that was the basis of his guest list.

And why – says Jesus – should we invite those who cannot invite us back?

because they cannot repay you; and exactly therefore, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

If you get your reward next week, because the people that eat with you today invite you to their party next week, then you will not be rewarded in eternity. What Jesus points to is the issue of motivation.

If you do things to work yourself up and to get things in return, you do it because of your own desire, for your own sake, for your own benefit. This is selfish.

3. Jesus himself

But doing things for the sake of others, without expecting payback, that is truly humble. That is a kingdom attitude. That is the attitude that belongs to the people of Jesus.

So Jesus tells the leader of the party to next time invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind. That will show a motivation to humbly serve others.

Just as Jesus has come for needy people, not for those who think they can fight and elbow their way through life, and who are in a position to organize sweet parties for their nearest friends and family in order to reap the benefits themselves.

So the whole party was severely criticized by Jesus: the guests for only thinking of themselves, by elbowing to the best seats

...and the leader for only thinking of himself and making sure that he would get something in return from the people he had invited to the diner.

Jesus came to save the lost... and the people at that party were only thinking of their own interests. And we also often tend to do that.

Jesus himself was the prime example of true humility and servanthood. Voluntarily he became the servant of mankind.

A few months after this diner party, Jesus died on the cross, as the servant of us all. He gave His life to invite us to communion around the table in church. He gives to us freely, we have nothing to give back, except becoming his followers.

Conclusion

God loved us first, and our love is a response of gratitude to his great mercy and kindness towards us. For us to follow his example and humbly, lovingly serve those around us, is our sacrifice for Him.

Servanthood and being generous for all people, this demands a measure of Christ-like self-sacrifice. That may be costly, sometimes painful, but it doesn't impoverish, but it rather enriches the soul of the giver.

Jesus makes clear that in the Kingdom of God, actions based on the desire to serve oneself, and to promote oneself in life, are not the actions that await rewards from God. They mean nothing in Gods Kingdom.

What is valuable in His eyes, is our humble servanthood that looks for the good of others.

Amen