

**“A Table Scape for the Kingdom”
Luke 14:1,7-14**

If you promise not to tell anyone, I’ll make a confession to you. When I have some time on my hands and don’t feel like doing anything else, I turn on the TV and watch the Food Network. You may be familiar with some of my “friends”: Emeril Lagasse, Paula Dean, Bobby Flay, and Ina Garten (the Barefoot Contessa). Believe me, I know them all and dream of being able to cook like they do.

There’s one I find especially amusing, even irritating – “Semi-Homemade Cooking with Sandra Lee.” Each show is thematic, usually dominated by a particular color scheme which is carried through the ingredients, the set design, Sandra’s clothes, the daily cocktail and the table scape that repeats the theme. Her table scape, where everyone’s place at the table is identified by “a simply darling” place card, is the crown jewel in what is purported to be perfectly beautiful, delicious, yet and simple dinner.

One day when Jesus dined at the home of a leading Pharisee. I wonder what the table scape was like. Obviously there were no place cards. With no assigned seating, Jesus soon noticed the guests elbowing each other for the places of honor. He then told a parable that warned of possible humiliation for those who vie for positions of rank and privilege – someone much more important than you might come along, for whom you will have to make room.

I can never read this passage without remembering my seminary days. I liked to worship at the East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. It is a gothic structure with a magnificent organ and an outstanding choir. I certainly don’t think God is more present in such a setting than here, but it always felt that way. One morning, Lucy and I sat down towards the front as usual (no self-respecting Presbyterian would ever regard the front pews as positions of honor to seek out). I noticed in the hymnal rack a Greek New Testament. I started looking at it, wondering if one of my fellow students left it there by mistake. Suddenly there was a tap on my shoulder. “This was Mr. So and So’s pew – would we please move back?” That Greek Testament marked his place, one that no one else should enter.

I don’t recall feeling humiliated, but it was a strange feeling, nevertheless. I often wonder what kind of “airs” we give off to those who walk in the door for the first time. Do we expect they should know where to go and what to do, how to act and how to dress? Do we unwittingly erect barriers because we feel so much at home and our guests do not? If that has ever been descriptive of this congregation, I hope it is less so today. I think we’ve come a long way in rounding off any sharp edges, increasing our hospitality quotient.

Jesus didn’t have to go to a dinner party among the Pharisees to see people stepping over each other. It was, and continues to be, a life-style among those who seek to follow him. His own disciples were known to argue among themselves about who was the greatest.¹ We still argue as to who has the best understanding of Jesus, who has had the greatest spiritual experience, and which denomination is the sure road to heaven while all the others are the sure road to hell.

In discussing the many denominations in the church, Frederick Buechner writes:

All the duplication of effort and waste of human resources. All the confusion about what The Church is, both within the ranks and without. All the counterproductive competition. All the unnecessarily empty pews and unnecessary expense. Then add to that picture the Roman Catholic Church, still more divided from the Protestant denominations than they are from each other, and by the time you're though, you don't know whether to burst into laughter or into tears.

When Jesus took the bread and said, "This is my body which is broken for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24), it's hard to believe that even in his wildest dreams he foresaw the tragic and ludicrous brokenness of the Church as his body. There's no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for differences, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the Church would look more like the kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess.²

In the Kingdom of God, there is no room for rank and privilege.! And Jesus also warns that there is no room for reciprocity. "When you do something good and generous in my name, don't look for pay-backs. Don't deceive yourselves into thinking that because you treat people well they will necessarily want to join your church. Rather, seek out those from whom you'll not likely receive a return."

There's a powerful statement in one of our confessions of faith that speaks about the church's responsibility in fighting poverty. "A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or *expects gratitude for its beneficence* (that is, expects some kind of pay-back) makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God."³

Let's bring this down to a more personal level. Have you ever given someone a gift and done something you consider really special for someone and they didn't say "thank you" or otherwise express their gratitude? Do you remember how you felt? Would the word *resentment* characterize those feelings? The only thing more ungraceful than failing to say "thank you," is for someone to expect it and then feel wounded if it is not forthcoming.

David Steele wrote this poem which is apropos:

Some basic rules define the source
Of pleasant social intercourse:
When friends share cookies (chip or date)
We don't return an empty plate
But sent it back all nicely spread
With slices of zucchini bread.
And piques of proper social training
Remind us, as we're entertaining,
To see that we do not forget
The people owed a dinner debt.
So social bonds are smooth and flat
When glued with careful tit for tat.

But when it comes to heaven's grace
Our tat for tit seems out of place.
How few of us command the wealth
To pay God back for kids or health.
For love, or comfort, friends and talent...
Our ledger's wholly out of balance.
We can't pay back the Lord above
For all God's countless gifts of love.

What Jesus is talking about is as the apostle Paul would later say. **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”**⁴

I wonder what it would be like if the great powers of the world would go to the United Nations and look not only to their own national interests, but also to the interest of the world as a whole. It strikes me as very sad to see the states in these supposedly *United States* of America leapfrogging over each other trying to have the first Presidential primary. I wonder what it would be like if the states put the nation's interest above regional interests. I wonder what marriage would be like if husbands and wives were subject *to each other* out of reverence for Christ.⁵ I wonder what the Schuylkill would be like if we let the other guy go first. I wonder what church would be like if we respected each other's theology and music as much as we did our own. I suppose you could say it would be like living in the kingdom of God.

If Sandra Lee was here this morning, you might hear her say something like this: “You're going to absolutely love the table scape I have for you this morning. It won't cost you a lot of money. You can get some inexpensive linen at the fabric store. Your favorite grocery store has the bread and juice you'll need. I got this cute basket at the dollar store. Note this time there are no place cards. Don't worry. You don't have to jump over each other trying to get the best seat, because every seat is the best seat in this house. No one will be too early or too late. Here there is room for all who would come. No one sits higher or lower than anyone else. Nor does anyone sit any closer to Jesus than anyone else. Here we gather on the common ground of God's grace where everyone is humbled without being humiliated and everyone is exalted without being inflated.”

1. Luke 9:46
2. *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 34-35
3. *Confession of 1967*, Book of Confessions, 9.46
4. Philippians 2:3
5. See Ephesians 5:21