

For four years in high school, I managed to never eat a single meal in the cafeteria—not one. I like to imagine I set some kind of record. For my first two years I took an extra class and would eat between classes, and then my junior and senior year I was allowed to leave campus, which I did, every day. I'd go home, where I felt safe and welcomed. For four years, I did anything I could to avoid the pain of exclusion.

I bet you've all had the feeling of being in a crowded place, a cafeteria, or a restaurant, and you're looking for someone, anyone you recognize. It's busy, and people are jostling to find seats, and then someone in the crowd calls your name. They've been waiting for you and have already saved you a seat. Do you know that feeling? That feeling is a little taste of heaven. I bet you've also known the opposite of that feeling as well, to be ignored and excluded. That's a taste of hell. Heaven and hell are a lot closer than we think. They're not about golden streets and fiery pits in the afterlife. They're about belonging and exclusion right here and now, about having a safe place to eat and be welcomed.

This year as we've been traveling through Luke's Gospel, we've been using this overarching metaphor of the Big Table. The metaphor works better some weeks more than others, but the reason we're using it is because in Luke, Jesus is always eating. He's constantly feeding people or being fed. He's either at parties or he's telling stories about parties, and in every single situation, he's upending our notions of who belongs at the table and who does not. He's continually breaking down the barriers that exclude, until all of us find that we have a special seat reserved just for us.

In today's reading, Jesus is eating a Sabbath meal in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and Luke says they were watching him closely. When Jesus has an encounter with the Pharisees, more often than not, he's either criticizing or challenging them, which can cause us to think of Pharisees as bad guys, but they are not. The Pharisees were a people's led reform movement within Judaism that sought to reconcile Israel to God by obedience to the Torah. You see, Israel was a bad place, and there were competing ideas on how to make things right. There were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes, all with different strategies to get Israel on the right track, but after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, it's Pharisaical Judaism that survives and leads to modern-day Judaism.

For us to think of the Pharisees as bad guys is one step away from thinking of modern-day Jews as bad guys, and thus contributing to anti-Semitism. Our Jewish friends don't appreciate it. Another reason that thinking of Pharisees as bad guys is problematic is that Jesus himself was most likely a Pharisee. That may sound strange to you, yet it explains why he spends so much time in synagogues, which were Pharisee-led spaces. It explains why he's in conflict with them so often. Our sharpest disagreements are usually with the people we are closest to often over the dinner table.

Here's Jesus at dinner with a Pharisee for the third time in Luke's Gospel, and he proceeds to give a lecture on table manners. He notices that everyone is jockeying to get the best seat in the house, so he suggests pulling a George Costanza and doing the opposite. Better to take the seat of least honor and be moved up than to overstep your place and have to be taken down a notch. Jesus is echoing the wisdom of the Proverbs, which says the same thing. Then he gives a Proverb of his own, saying, "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." This echoes Mary's Magnificat back in Luke chapter 1, which proclaims that God is bringing about a great

reversal, in which those on top will be brought low, while those on the bottom will be raised up, a vision of equality, where all are of us are on the same level, equally loved and cared for.

Now, imagine being the host or a guest at this party and hearing Jesus say this. How would you feel? Would you think he was shaming you? I think I would. I think I would immediately go into defensive mode. I'd find some justification for why I was sitting where I was. I'd point out how others were doing it much worse than me, and really it's Jesus who was lifting himself up by judging everyone else's actions, so maybe he's the proud one. Do you see how quickly the ego creates a story to defend itself? I hate feeling shame, that deep sense that who I am is wicked and wrong, and I am nothing if not a good guy in my own story. If it's even suggested I might be anything other than a good guy, my ego goes into attack mode. That's why most of us don't like identifying with the Pharisees in the Gospels. We want to identify with those who Jesus heals and includes, not those he criticizes and challenges, but we need Jesus to do both for us, don't we? Because even Jesus' criticism heals us when we receive it.

Here's the truth, we are fundamentally beloved of God, and nothing changes that. No amount of sin or selfishness undoes this most basic truth of who you are. You are God's beloved, full stop, already invited to the table. But we don't believe it, do we? We think we need to hustle to get ahead, to be recognized as someone who matters. We jockey and compete to prove our worth, to get a better seat and move ahead. That's just the world we live in. It's the game we all play, and Jesus is suggesting we play a different game, because in the end, no one ever wins this game. Despite how it may feel, Jesus isn't shaming us or telling us to get our act together. Jesus is inviting us to see that none of us are well until all of us are well.

That's why he says don't invite your friends and wealthy neighbors to your next meal. Instead invite those who cannot pay you back. Again, he's not shaming his dinner host for not being more inclusive. He's inviting us to a unitive awareness, to see ourselves in the very people we exclude. The world tells us there are people you can live without, and most of us believe that. Let's be honest. There are people you'd rather not deal with, and though you may not say it, you probably wish weren't even here. How many of us if given the power of Thanos to snap our fingers and do away with a certain amount of the population would do it? And even if you wouldn't, I bet you'd think about it. I would, and God wouldn't. That's one of the many differences between me and God. There's no one that God can do without. That's what grace means, and that's why we don't understand it.

We live in a world where to get ahead you have to hustle and prove yourself worthy and work harder than the other person. That's the story we've been taught, and we've been told it's a good story. Jesus is here to tell us that it isn't. If this story is true, then if you don't get ahead, you must be an abject failure. And it's even worse if you do get ahead, because then you feel entitled to look down on everyone else who must not have worked as hard as you did. This story always puts the high moral distance between us and others. We're either looking down on ourselves or on other people or both at the same time. It's a terrible story that leaves us isolated, and God is inviting us to learn a better story where everyone is worthy, and everyone belongs.

Jesus invites us to rethink what it means to belong to continually break down the barriers that exclude, until all of us find that we have a VIP seat waiting just for us. Those

who find their way to Covenant often say how welcomed they feel here, which is wonderful. But what about those haven't yet been invited, those who've been left out on purpose or by accident in our church and community? What barriers need to be broken down so those who've been excluded might find they too belong, that we've been waiting for them to come, and have been saving a seat just for them?

Here's good news friends: you belong at God's Table, not because of what you've done, nor because of what you've left undone. You don't need to change a thing about yourself. You are a VIP at God's Table, and so are those you could snap your fingers and do without. They belong too, just as you do. If that feels like criticism, then know it's a criticism that heals you, because none of us are well until all of us are well. There is no one that God does without, not you, not me, no one. Thanks be to God.