

Table Grace for Life

Luke 14:1, 7-14

In my local community paper this week, some 4- and 5-year-olds were asked why their dads were the best. Here are some of the responses:

- “I love going to the zoo with him and he gives me ice creams.”
- “He helps me when I get I stuck. Daddy helps me with all my Maths.”
- “He gives me hugs and he’s my favourite, favourite dad.”

To all of you who celebrate Father’s Day today, I join in saying “Happy Father’s Day!”

I don’t recall lots about my dad, I have to say. But I remember him teaching me this table grace, which I’m sure is familiar to many Lutheran families: “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.” Perhaps you’ll say this grace later today, over a special Father’s Day meal.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus teaches something vital about table etiquette, table *grace*... that is, *grace for life* which is not to be forgotten, but rather to learned, to be lived, and to be passed on. Sharing meals in family, in community, and *as* community seems important. It was important back in Jesus’ day, as it is now also. I imagine many people will be sharing lunch or dinner today, and there will be all sorts of cuisines prepared by many in many different places. Similarly, there are many accounts of Jesus sharing meals at table with different people. Today we hear that “On one occasion, Jesus went to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath.” It’s interesting the number of different types of meals referred to by Jesus in this passage.

- “the meal on the Sabbath” (verse 1)
- “wedding banquet” (verse 8)
- “lunch” (verse 12)
- “dinner” (verse 12)
- “banquet” (verse 13).

Jesus refers to different types of meals where people gather together in order to teach something important about grace — grace for life through fellowship at the table.

Table fellowship is clearly a time for community, for family, for coming together in common fellowship. Table fellowship was and is also a place and time for celebration, for God’s people to celebrate. So what is Jesus doing, and what is he teaching us today?

In verses 7-14, Jesus first uses a a parable to teach about what it is to be a guest. “When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.” This meal is hosted by a leader of the Pharisees, clearly an important person. People probably felt they, too, were important just to be invited, and they wanted to be seen in the social pages, on Facebook as being important, as having a good reputation; and so they wanted to sit up the front near the host. This is the place of honour, of importance, of status. But Jesus says, “No” — this is not the way to be community. This is not the way of God’s people and God’s community.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So the way for a guest at the table is the way of humility, lest you be humiliated by trying to be the most important. Put aside self-interest.

In a similar way, Jesus addresses those who host meals: Don’t just invite those who are important or your relatives or friends or rich neighbours. In other words, don’t make your invitations out of self-interest. But invite those who cannot repay you: the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

In community then, whether you be the guest or the host of the meal: Be humble and look to others to serve them. Be humble, lest you be humiliated by your own self-seeking. Learn grace from me. Table grace, but grace that applies to the whole of life.

Because this is Jesus: Jesus for us, for our community, for all people. He is the humble one who serves with the table grace of God, and who forms a God community through this grace. In the next chapter of Luke’s gospel we hear, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2).

This is why Jesus has come; to bring the grace of God to people in need... to all people who cannot repay God for the cost of human sin. But these poor Pharisees and scribes fail to see this.

But it’s not *just* these Pharisees, is it? Later in Luke’s gospel, on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, he takes bread and wine, and gives it a new grace meaning at the table. And at this table, it’s not the Pharisees but the disciples, Jesus’ close disciples who are still mired in self-interest:

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

So, it’s not just others that we might point the finger at, like the Pharisees; but it’s also disciples who jockey for position. It’s us. It’s you. It’s me. It’s us.

Jesus says this is not the way. This is not the way of God. Rather he says I am among you as one who serves. Learn, receive from me, and live by grace.

Whether it be as individuals or as a community, we need grace, and we need always to learn grace at table from Jesus anew. We strive in life for so many things. We set out to be good stewards, to build good lives, solid reputations, to care for our loved ones, and care for our community. All these things are important and right. But so easily individually, and as a community (yes, even a community of disciples), so easily we can slip beyond that good intention to becoming so self-reliant, and wrapped up in our being right and worthy and worth something important, that we lose the way of grace, the way of life, the way of community, the community that we are called to be. Now is the time for us to receive and learn anew the way of Jesus, the way of humility and being built up in the grace of God who comes for us — sinners in need of grace, community in need of healing. Perhaps we even feel shame that we on our own can’t just do it all and heal ourselves,

even with the best of intentions. We need help. Thankfully, Jesus comes to us today to serve us at his table.

My dad taught me to pray, "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest". It's a wonderful prayer, and I still pray it. But what's even more wonderful and real is that today, and every time people gather in worship to come together in communion at this table, Jesus is already here bidding us, "Come, and be my precious guest. Come, sinner and saintly band of sinners, to the banquet I prepare for you. Come, come to the feast of victory. Come, for I am here. I have overcome sin and death and the evil one for you. I have overcome for you on the cross. So, come to my feast of victory and receive grace for you."

And then practice, learn my grace, my table grace for life, my fellowship among you, for going out into the world around you. In humility, be re-formed by me as community, as you reach out to one another and to the world with amazing grace. I am among you now as one who serves. Learn from me and do likewise. Come, Lord Jesus, and make us your gifts to the world. Amen.