

LET'S DO LUNCH

August 31, 2025 - Luke 14: 1, 7-14

By Dean Feldmeyer

SUNDAY DINNER

Sunday dinner was always a pretty big deal in our family when I was growing up.

We would come home from church and change our clothes and then help set the table while mom got everything ready. Pot roast was a favorite because it could be cooked while we were at church and be ready when we got home. Even now, when I smell pot roast cooking, I am transported back to the Sunday afternoons of my childhood.

Dinner – it wasn't lunch on Sundays, it was dinner – took a long time, too. We sat around and talked about church, the sermon, the Sunday School lesson and other things, too. Sports, work, school. Sometimes we used the good china.

This was true when we invited someone to come home and have Sunday dinner with us. The minister and his wife were friends of my parents, so their family was often invited. If a missionary came through and spoke at the service my parents usually invited them to come for dinner. That's when it was good china and fried chicken and homemade bread with real butter and sour cherry cobbler a la mode. I loved it when missionaries came.

Later, when we older kids got to be teenagers my mom talked some sense to my dad and, from time to time, Sunday dinner moved from the dining room of our house to a local eatery – Zaph's Cafeteria –which we all loved because the portions were huge and delicious and there were no dishes to wash.

There was never any jostling for position at these Sunday dinners, even when the pastor, or some missionaries were present. Seating was assigned by my parents, and it was all based on practical considerations. Mom sat next to the baby, close to the kitchen so she could get up and get things. I sat on the other side of the baby so I could take over when mom was up. Lisa and Scot sat on either side of my dad so they wouldn't scrap and pick at each other, and Brian sat next to Scot because they just seemed to always get along. Guests were interspaced among us as best as we could manage. They kinda had to take potluck where seating was concerned.

Sunday dinners in those days as being big, delicious, loud – a mixture of equal parts food, talk, laughter, debate, lectures, and general mayhem. Jean says that the first time she experienced one of those meals she went home and told her mother – “You wouldn't believe it. It's just mass confusion. I've never seen so much food in all my life.”

That was the Feldmeyer version of the Sabbath dinner, the vision that comes to my mind every time I read of a feast or banquet in the Bible.

SABBATH DINNER

Today's lesson from the Gospel of Luke tells the story of another Sunday dinner.

Actually, it was a Saturday dinner, as the Sabbath falls on Saturday, but the nature of the event would have been about the same. Generally, among the strictly observant Jews of that time –and the Pharisees would have been very strict in their observances – Sabbath or Shabbat (Hebrew) was observed from sundown Friday to Sundown Saturday.

During that time, they would go to worship services three times: Friday evening, Saturday morning, and late Saturday afternoon. And each service would be followed by a festive meal.

In the story we have before us it is generally allowed that Jesus and some Pharisees have been to the Saturday afternoon service and are now heading back to the home of one of the Pharisees to eat the final meal of Shabbat called Seudah Schlishit (Say-OO-dah Shish-ET) a light meal consisting of dried fish, cheese, fruit and wine.

On the way to the meal Jesus happens upon a man with dropsy, or what, today, is called edema – an unnatural retention of water in the body which can cause the person to literally drown in his own bodily fluids. Even though it is not strictly allowed to heal a person on the Sabbath (healing is considered work) Jesus heals the man anyway and, when the Pharisees object, he chastises them for not putting works of mercy and charity above the law as scripture allows and even expects. The intent of the law, he says, was to make of us a kind, gentle, merciful and generous people and you have perverted it into a set of rules that restrict our behavior and keep us from doing those very acts of kindness and mercy that God desires us to do.

The group continues on to the Pharisee's house for dinner and an almost comic scene ensues. No sooner do they arrive when they all start jostling and jockeying, shoving and pushing to get the best seats, the seats closest to the host. These are the seats of honor, the ones with the highest status and prestige.

Most scholars agree that Jesus has been invited to this meal because the host thinks he will bring some sparks to the dinner conversation. Wait 'til these pompous, overfed Pharisees get a load of this guy, the host is thinking. His teachings are much like what the Pharisees teach but he also has a way of zinging people who think too highly of themselves. This is gonna be great.

And Jesus doesn't disappoint.

First, he watches them as they jockey and jostle for the best seats, the seats of honor near the head of the table. Then he offers what appears to be some simple, homey, even fatherly advice on guest etiquette, the kind our parents might offer to us – say please and thank you, speak respectfully to your hosts, be genuine and generous, that kind of stuff. But his advice is: Don't push and shove to get the best seats.

But it's more than good etiquette. There's a practical consideration here. What if someone comes in later who has higher status and more power than you and your host has to ask you to get up and give your seat to the newcomer? By that time the only seats that are left will be the ones at the foot of the table, where the least important people sit and you will have to go there, and you will be humiliated.

Instead, it is more prudent to go to the foot of the table and sit there first. Then, if you are worthy, the host will tell someone else to get up and you will be invited to move up. A big deal will have been made over you, and you will be honored. And if not, you have lost nothing.

Simple, right? Just sit at the lowest end in the humblest seats. In fact, you might want to get there early so you can jockey and jostle and shove and push your way to *those* seats so you can be the last-est and least-est person in the room. You'll have your host over a barrel. He'll have to move you up, right?

But then, just about the time we think we have this thing figured out so we can guarantee that we'll be sitting in the best seats in the house, Jesus throws us a curve ball. This whole discussion isn't really about the dinner party. It's a metaphor, a parable about the Kingdom of God in which kingdom there is no first or last or higher or lower.

When you live life in the kingdom all this jostling and jockeying for power and status is just so much nonsense, so much wasted effort, so much unfaith. So, give it up.

Why not let go of our need for approval by people with more power and more possessions than we have? Why don't we just stop worrying so much about what people think about us – who likes us and who doesn't, who approves of us and who disapproves? Why not give up all that scheming about how your guests will have to pay you back for your generosity and, instead, just let your generosity be genuine?

When you throw a dinner party, invite those who can't pay you back with a reciprocal invitation. That, he says, is generosity that pays off...eventually.

JOCKEYING AND JOSTLING TODAY

In 2009, a group of American Muslims in New York wanted to build a mosque and cultural center on land they have owned for decades. The land, however, was two city blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center, which was destroyed on September 11, 2001 by Muslim extremists, the largest mass murder in American history, killing 2,518 Americans and 234 foreign nationals.

The site is considered "hallowed" by many and some thought Muslims should not be allowed to build there. Others believed that our constitutionally protected freedom of religion gives them the right to build but that it would be insensitive to build a mosque only two blocks away from the site we have come to know as "ground zero."

The proposed building became the source of much debate in New York City and across the country, especially among politicians and media pundits, many of whom were jockeying and jostling to land on the most popular and/or politically profitable side of the argument.

Questions about how close is too close and how far away is far enough were all but lost in the shouting. What exactly this mosque and cultural center might accomplish in the name of religious tolerance and understanding was not even explored.

For how many people, I wondered, was this an issue of sensitivity and for how many was it an issue of political posturing for the sake of status and power? How many of those whose voices were so strident in the debate were simply pushing buttons and pulling strings to gain some political advantage or increase their market share? Today, the site is the location of luxury condominiums about which no one raised a concern about sensitivity.

In Florence, Kentucky, just south of Cincinnati, another group of American Muslims were seeking to build a mosque so they could move from the rented property they used for decades. The proposal was met with harsh opposition even though there was no “hallowed ground” near by – just a shopping mall. The mosque opened in 2021 without incident.

A brawl breaks out in downtown Cincinnati on a hot Saturday night and becomes a feature story on the national news. One wonders if it would have been so 20 years ago before everyone carried a camera in their hip pocket and filmed everything that happened around them.

Politicians have sprinted to Cincinnati jockeying and jostling to hold “town meetings” and “forums” in front of the local news cameras where they feign outrage and disgust at the sorry state of lawlessness and crime and racism in ours and other American cities and argue about who is to blame. And lost in all of this is the fact that while dozens of people filmed the sorry event, only one, ONLY ONE, called 911 to report it.

Sadly, it seems that there is no tragedy so tragic, no crisis so critical, no danger so threatening, and no problem so complex that someone won't use it for political gain. How does a Christian person respond to all this jockeying and jostling? What is our place and how do we relate to a world where the most important thing is not what or how well you serve but your place at the table?

DINNER PARTY

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we find ourselves at a dinner party with Jesus, who has probably been invited because the host thinks he will liven up the table conversation. What, he no doubt wonders, will happen when I turn this guy loose on the rest of these pompous Pharisees? He just can't wait to see the sparks fly.

Or maybe not.

Maybe he is genuinely interested in what Jesus has to say. Remember, much of what Jesus preached was in keeping with Pharisaic theology and beliefs. Maybe the host simply wanted his friends to hear what Jesus said so they could talk about it around the table, as was the custom with rabbinical pedagogy of that time.

But whatever the reason he was invited to the party, Jesus' concern isn't about what the Pharisees believe. He believes the same things. The problem with the Pharisees is that they say they believe what God and the prophets say, but those beliefs are not reflected in their behavior. They are hypocrites and Jesus can't stand hypocrisy. SO, he throws a monkey wrench into their lovely little dinner by subtly pointing their hypocrisies out to them first by pointing out their selfishness and pettiness, then by pointing out their worship of social status.

The Sabbath dinner table in Luke's story is a marvelous metaphor that can be translated perfectly into our time and sphere. The jockeying and jostling for position and status goes on in our private and personal lives, in our families, our communities, our country and the world.

The hunger for status and the jealousy that bubbles up in us when we don't get it eats at us like a poisonous rash. The teenage girl who wants to be popular, the boy who wants to be admired like the quarterback – they understand it. The college students who want to be thin and attractive or rich and pampered – they understand it. The stay-at-home mom who worries that her working friends don't approve of her and the working father whose promotions didn't come as quickly as he thought they would and has had to watch younger, less qualified people move up the ladder – they understand it. Everyone who has ever attended a class reunion understands it.

The desire for high status -- the admiration of our peers, the jealousy of lesser talents, the power to impress the impressers, the ability to dispense advice and be taken seriously – is universal in our culture, and maybe every culture.

It poisons and pollutes our political systems, it cripples our economy and our commerce, it weakens our relationships, and it undermines our institutions even as we work to build a better world. **But** in this story, Jesus offers a better way.

Usually, Jesus's parables move from the indicative to the imperative – from **this is the way it is** to **this is what to do about it**. But this may be that rare story which moves from the imperative to the indicative. It is clear about what we must do – give up our desire and our drive for status over others and give ourselves to those who cannot pay us back, who cannot enlarge our bank account or our face in the community.

The question is how can we do it? What is it that Christians have that allows us to let go of this powerful drive and turn our attention to those who have nothing to offer us in return?

Well, we have Jesus and his grace. We already have that ultimate status which comes only from God. We are saved, freed from this never-ending, Sisyphean pursuit. And that freedom is ours because Jesus did as he bids us do. He gave up the high status that he rightly deserved and became lowly for our sake.

Go, therefore, says he, and do likewise. **AMEN.**