



Jesus' Dinner Stories

TEXT
Luke 14:1-14

July 17, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

This past week, I was in New York City for a few days. Since I have been here at Village Church, I have been trying to create a gathering of pastors who are doing young adult ministry. This thing we do is fairly new, and I've been craving a chance to sit with others who are doing it, to learn from one another.

So it finally happened, and four of us young adult pastors from our biggest PCUSA churches met up in New York City. We picked New York because Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City has the longest continual running young adult ministry in our denomination.

I have been so looking forward to talking with others who feel called to serve our young adults in their 20s and 30s. But we realized in the months before this, there was a problem. The problem was that the four of us we were able to pull together are also pretty good friends. We've known each other since seminary. We've worked in the same circles. We've held each other's babies and attended each other's ordinations.

I only say this was a problem because, as self-reflective and responsible individuals, we knew

our instinct in being together would be to ... shop. We'd enjoy one another's company, eat, drink and be merry, as friends do. There was a risk we wouldn't get down to business.

So to ensure we stayed on task, we were good Presbyterian pastors, and we created an itinerary ... and a reading list ... and some goals and objectives. We kept our time as ordered and decent as we could, to wanting to wake three days later with great new shoes and no new ideas. And we did a fairly good job. Staying on task is surprisingly easy when we all care greatly about this work.

But it was the case that, despite our ordered and planned time, our best conversations happened always at dinner. It was over pizza and plenty of wine that we laughed the hardest. It was with baskets of bread and rosé that we contemplated the state of our world. And it was with four spoons of chocolate cake that we wept together, understanding that proclaiming Christ's good news to a world that is resistant to hearing it in different ways than ever before is a demanding call.

And so we read, and we learned, and we talked, and we strategized — but our moments

of deepest conviction came as they most often do, over the dinner table. It's often that way. We know that when we eat together in intentional Christian fellowship, something holy has the possibility of happening.

That's the point of this summer's sermon series. That's why we're spending all of June and July and August at the table, with the eating stories. In Luke, Jesus is hungry, and we find him over and over again at the table. It's where holy stuff happens.

Today is the midpoint in this series. We've been here for six weeks; we have six weeks more ahead of us. And in this mid-summer week, I think our text comes to us as a gift. This text is longer than our other texts have been. And I say it's a gift because, I don't know about you, but I've started to feel that summer has become a little long itself.

In this summer that has dragged us through more national tragedy than I can ever remember happening in one summer, I'm grateful that Jesus is at the table with us. I'm grateful that his stories are longer and more plentiful than usual — not just one story, but three.

In this middle week in this long summer, *I just want to sit at the table and listen to Jesus.*

Jesus is walking with some Pharisees, going to dinner as one has invited him to do. On his way, he encounters a man with dropsy. It's a strange word, but you can look it up and see that it's a medical condition, one that today we call "edema," or the swelling and fluid buildup that one can get all over the body when something else is wrong. It's painful and can make it difficult to move — especially in the ancient world, where walking is the only means of transportation. It's a visible symptom of a greater invisible illness.

Jesus looks at this sick man, and he asks the Pharisees walking with him, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?"

Mind you, Sabbath laws were important then and now for our Jewish friends. It's not a suggestion to rest on the Sabbath, but a command. My most devout Jewish friends in Miami were known to call over their Christian friends as Friday Shabbat would begin, to turn on and off their lights and prepare any food they didn't have done ahead of time. No work of any kind, even so much as flipping a light switch, can be done on the Sabbath.

The religious leaders walking with him would consider healing to be "work" that is prohibited on the Sabbath. But in response to Jesus' question, they're silent, and Jesus heals him. And after the healing, Jesus prods, and again he asks: "If a child or an ox fell into a well on the Sabbath, would they not pull it out, or not?" And again, they are silent.

When they reached their dinner spot, Jesus watches, and he tells these stories. He tells the guests they shouldn't sit at the place of honor. "Sit in the lowly place." And then he tells the hosts they shouldn't invite their friends, but instead the poor, the lame, the needing. "Don't invite those who can repay the invite."

This table encounter actually continues, as Jesus tells one more story about a banquet — a story we'll hear next week.

People gathered at a table ... a meal. But a meal is never just a meal when Jesus arrives.

The guests thought out their seats. The host planned and prepared. But all of it is not quite right, Jesus says. Just invite all the people. And sit on the floor. And heal those you meet on the way. And don't expect anything in return. Jesus' dinner vision looks a little more simple than the one he's been invited to — maybe a little more simple than the ones we try to create.

And I think that's how it happens. I think we should plan and order our time to be the best pastors and people and citizens we can be. But I think it's in the moments when bread and wine are plentiful, in the moments when we're intentional about recognizing Jesus at the table with us, that holy work happens.

Our world is complicated ... and hard. And I know we're all, as humans who live on this planet, searching for answers that seem to be hiding in complicated or hard-to-reach places. But really, I think it might be more simple. I think the answers we seek might already be here. And

we find them when we show up at the table; when we allow Jesus in; when we follow him.

A lot of the struggles we face in the world today are *not* simple things. Race is not simple. Poverty is not simple. Xenophobia, fear of the foreigner, is not simple. Our political landscape, promising to get crazier this week, is not simple. And when we try to simplify difficult things, boiling issues into sound bytes and social media posts, we complicate and divide our world even more.

But I worry we've done something different to our faith. When it comes to matters of faith, of what we believe and how we are to live, I worry we *overcomplicate* things. We concern ourselves with context and cultural understanding and historical awareness. And the knowledgeable and academic pursuit to understand our faith is good and worthy of our time. But it is totally possible that all the answers we're so frantically looking for are, and have always been, right here.

You see, we could take this text today, and we could talk about early Sabbath law, and why Jesus seems keen to anger the leaders regarding it here. We could talk about the table sitting order designed by Jewish leaders 2,000 years ago, and why Jesus' comments would have made everyone mad. We could attempt to understand the nuances of early Jerusalem's cultural understanding of dinner invitations and the repayment process.

As 21st century well-educated, progressive Christians,

we are fully capable of knowing all of these things. But I wonder instead if maybe Jesus just wants us to heal each other; wants us to humble ourselves; wants us to give without expecting return; wants us to have dinner with those we love and those we don't, and to focus on those at the table more than all else that we put into the planning. I wonder if maybe it's all simpler than we've made it out to be.

It's been a long summer: Orlando, Istanbul, Baghdad, Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas, Nice, Turkey. We bring all of ourselves to this table: our brokenness, and the brokenness of the world that rests on us. And in these past weeks, that's been a lot. And it's confusing and hard and awful.

And Jesus says:

Look for the healing. I got delayed for a painful 10 hours in the airport this week, and a young man with his young son saw me get more upset than I should have been. I would be stuck all day, and my phone was almost dead, and my mom was going into surgery, and the weight of all of it was more crushing than it should have been. And so this guy and his young son walked up to me with a cookie they had just bought — and told me to feel better. Just look for the symptoms. You don't need to know the whole story. Heal what you can see, any way you can, despite any social rules that tell you not to.

Humble yourself. Confidence is a good thing, but power is not. Know the difference. Be willing to sit on the floor at dinner; be willing to be quiet and listen.

And watch your invite list. I know I'm watching ours here. I spent time in these last weeks reaching out to any community organization I could, letting them know we had free dinner here on Sunday nights. Our dinner is free for a reason. Our table is open to all for a reason. I'm working to make sure that those who might be hungry know where they can come for food. And I'd be glad if you joined me in this. If we only invite those who can pay us for the meal, we're doing it wrong.

After months of wanting to sit down with other young adult pastors to learn some magic secret, what I learned this week was that the answers are the same as they've always been. The holy stuff happens when we just sit down with Jesus.

God knows the world is hard. God tried helping us the hard way. The prophets weren't getting through. The kings always screw it up. And so God chose a different way, coming to us as a child; coming to us as one of us so this part wouldn't be so complicated. Put your sacrifices and your rules to rest. I don't want to debate Sabbath laws anymore, and I don't want to spend time on who sits where. There is healing and feeding to do. So just follow. Just follow.

The path Jesus leads us on isn't an easy one. His table guests never liked his stories about how to do things differently. There is risk in refusing the world's complicated order. But acknowledging a difficult path is different than pretending we don't know where the path is. It's not easy,

but it's simple. It's here. It's always been right here.

And in the moments Jesus knew his followers would be most confused, as he prepared for his arrest and his death, he went to this table again. He didn't give them the answers to all the evil in the world. He told them to eat together; to invite everyone; to break the bread and pour the cup and do it joyfully and often.

The simplicity of this call to follow is easy to miss in this complicated world. The world is hard. We must resist the urge to make the following hard too.

So let's eat. Let's heal what we can. Let's not think too highly of ourselves. Let's give without expectation. Let's do the simple things as we follow the One who did the hard part for us.

Let's pray: *Holy God, help us to heal when we can heal; to humble ourselves; to invite all and to mean it. Help us to resist the urge to make this part hard. Amen.*



This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.