Towson Presbyterian Church

August 28, 2022

Luke 14: 1, 7-14
Rev. Joel Strom

“So Much More Than Just Good Table Manners”

**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

*7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 8‘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; 9and 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. 10But 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. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

*12 He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’*

Jesus sure loved a good meal. Throughout Luke’s Gospel we will find Jesus again and again at a dinner table. And he loves to accept dinner invitations from just about anyone. Three times in Luke, including today, Jesus says yes to dine with a Pharisee, who was a religious leader within Judaism. A few chapters from now he will say yes to dine with Zacchaeus, the not well-like tax collector. Whoever offers a dinner invitation to Jesus he says yes.

And I would say that he also loved the communal aspect of meals. For its at meals and dinners where people get to sit down together and not only share food but share their lives with one another. I think that’s what *we* love about sharing meals with people because relationships are so often built around the dinner table. You learn about people when you share a meal with them. Ideas and thoughts are shared. It’s around meals that we hear stories, and we listen, and we learn, and we ask questions.

And for Jesus, meals seemed to be all that, but they were *also* an opportunity for him to teach, and teach about God, and what he called the Kingdom of God. Meals were where he brought into focus who was *not* truly welcomed and loved and accepted within his culture, and who were pushed to the edges. Meals were one of the primary places where he pointed to the love and radical acceptance of God, which for him seemed to have no limits, or boundaries, or barriers, or walls.

It’s in these meals that Jesus shared with people, that we can get a sense of what the Church is called to be, and to do, in the world. Within these stories we can get a picture of who we are called to be. And the church is supposed to offer something that the world needs, right? The Church, it doesn’t just exist for itself. It doesn’t exist so it can simply stay alive and keep the lights on. The Church throughout the world, and our church, Towson Presbyterian Church, is called to offer something that the world needs.

I don’t know who coined this phrase, but I love it, and I think it’s true: *The Church Exists for the Sake of the World*. The Church, you, and me, all of us, together, we are to be a life-giving presence in and to the world. We don’t turn away from the suffering of the world… we turn towards it. And we find ourselves right now in a time where it seems that the world is not as receptive to the Church as it once was. Pastor Rob and I have talked about this over the last few years - church participation in the US is just not what it used to be. Less and less people are seeking out churches today. And it’s not just in the US, it’s in many other places throughout the world, too, and you might find that to be discouraging, or also maybe a little encouraging. I can see it both ways.

If you were here at the end of July through the beginning of August, you noticed that I was not. My family and I were finishing up the grant money we received for my sabbatical last summer and spent 3 weeks in Scandinavia. We had earmarked a good chunk of the grant for international travel, but with Covid last summer we could not travel out of the country. So, we saved that money for this summer and spent three weeks in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

For the first part of our trip, we were on a group tour, and on our first full day with our group we were touring Copenhagen. As we were driving through the streets of Denmark’s capital, our tour guide was sharing all kinds of information about Danish history and culture, and as we passed one of the oldest churches in Copenhagen, our tour guide, Stina, said that less than 2% of people in Scandinavia attend church regularly. Less than 2%?!

Well, my ears perked up and I needed to have a conversation with her about this. After our next stop, we were slowly getting back on the bus I kind of cornered Stina. *Stina,* I said*, I need to know everything about this. You said less than 2% attend church regularly here. Can you tell me more about that? What’s the cause? Why and how do you think this happened? For those that do attend, how is faith practiced within faith traditions today?*

Do you know the reaction you often get when you unload eight questions at once on someone? They have that glazed look in their eye, and Stina literally took a step back from me and the non-verbal on her face said *slow down, buddy…let’s pump the brakes here.* She didn’t really have an answer for me, and I’m not surprised because this is a large conversation, and any answer would need to be multi-pronged. But she did say that many of the rituals are still practiced within churches – baptisms, confirmation, weddings, funerals – but regular participation is *gone* for the most part.

And the questions of why, this is a big question, and there is not one singular answer, there are many. But I wonder if one answer is that the communal aspect of church - the sense of community that is found in church - is just being found in other places now, and it’s not desired like it used to be. Because community, and good community *is* all around us. We can find it in so many places, and they’re good and healthy, too. My family has found it in the neighborhood we live in and the school system we’re a part of. We’re grateful to have it. And so often, good community, where relationships are forming, and there’s listening and learning from one another, is found when we do it while sharing a meal. It’s arguably the primary way we build community with people. We do it with food.

We got a glimpse of that kind of community and how it can be formed in Scandinavia. After we finished up our group tour we headed back to Denmark and took a train up to this small seaside town called Hornbaek. The ocean was within walking distance, and we stayed at the Hornbaek Hotel. Breakfast was included in our stay, but dinner was optional and an extra expense.

And it was the Hornbaek Hotel’s dinner that drew us to it. At breakfast families sat at individual tables, but at dinner they combined all the tables together so there was one, or sometimes two, 25-foot-long tables where everyone sat next to and across from each other, and dinner was family style. The brought in a whole bunch of food and we passed it around and shared a meal. And community just naturally formed.

The first night I sat next to a man from Denmark who was not staying at the hotel but lived 15 minutes away. He was there with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law, and they came for the meal. And we each shared about our lives, our work, and our families. The next night we sat next to a family from Amsterdam who were on vacation, and again over the course of a meal community was formed. We learned about each other, we listened to one another, we heard each other’s stories. Not only was the food delicious, but the whole experience was great, and meaningful.

And part of the gift of being away for three weeks is that it can give you the opportunity to break out of the rut, and the tunnel-vision that we often find ourselves in, and the never-ending to-do lists, whether it’s at home or at work. Getting away can be so good and so needed. It can give you fresh eyes and a fresh perspective. And I found myself asking this question while I was away, because we had experienced some great community on our trip, within our group tour, and at Horbaek Hotel. I asked myself, what’s different about the kind of community compared to the community we find at church? What makes a community of faith unique?

Or maybe a better question is*…why do we need it?*

*What does it offer the world?*

Karl Barth was a 20th century pastor and theologian from Switzerland. He’s seen as one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century, and he has an answer to that question that I think is very helpful.

He says that the church, in its communal gatherings, points to the love that God has for the world in four ways. Barth says that first, as the church reaches out to all nations, it overcomes any national, or ethnic, or linguistic barriers. The church is that community that says we might be American and Danish, but in a deeper sense what we really are is children of God.

Second, he says in its attitude towards racial differences, the church refuses to divide itself up between “special” white, or black, or brown congregations. We all gather around the same communion table. The church is to be a community that does not let race divide us but instead brings us together.

Third, the church responds to the multitude of human cultures by bringing people together to overcome cultural differences, rather than sanctify and bless them. Barth doesn’t mean the church wipes out culture…no…instead, Christianity can find a home within all cultures, and the witness of the Church points to something deeper than culture.

And fourth, Barth says the Christian community sets aside class divisions that separate the rich from the poor. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The church is to be this light, this witness, this example that is striving to heal, and transcend the divisions, and the barriers, and the walls that consume the world. And one of the best ways that the church does this is over a meal. Over a shared meal where people are listening to one another, learning from one another, and relationships are being formed.

Towards the end of our trip, we were in Bergen, Norway, and one evening we were searching for somewhere to eat. Our lunch that day had been small, we’d each had an apple followed by a large ice cream cone. Some of you might say, *now that sounds like a pretty good lunch to me*, and I tend to agree, but by early evening we were famished, and wandering the streets of Bergen for a place to eat.

My wife ducked into a restaurant, checked out the menu and gave us a wave to come on in. They were playing classic rock music from the US and serving burgers and fries. This will do just fine.

We were sitting right by the window looking out onto the street, and as we waited for our food, we noticed a small group of people slowly taking food out of a minivan and setting it up on tables. At first my wife and I said to ourselves, *Oh, look, they have some kind of a pop-up, impromptu meal going on right here. Friends have gathered and they each brought something to share.*

Our stomachs kept rumbling, and as we anxiously looked for our food, we kept looking through the window at this meal happening 50 feet away from us and we started to wonder if this was more than just a pop-up dinner amongst friends. We started to wonder if not everyone had brought something to this meal. This looked to be a *different* kind of communal meal. Some were giving food, and others were just receiving food. But we could see community happening. We could see conversations, and listening, and sharing.

As we sat in the restaurant noticing this meal being shared and community forming within it, we noticed that this group was standing right in front of a building, and we realized that this building was actually a church, and one of the oldest churches in Bergen, and this meal was most likely a part of that church’s mission. The church was so old that it didn’t have windows, because when it was built, windows were too expensive. And this old, ancient church, in this area where less than 2% of people are actively involved in a community of faith, was still living into its calling, to be that community that witnesses to the love that God has for the world by striving to heal and transcend the divisions and barriers that consume the world. The light from that church was still shining.

It was like what Jesus said at the very end of today’s scripture reading: *‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.*

I don’t think Jesus meant that literally. He enjoyed meals with all people, regardless of their socio-economic status. And all of us host dinners for family and friends… I sure do. But the point he’s trying to make is, do you only offer meals just for those just within your inner circle? Do you shield yourself from the suffering world…or do you turn yourself towards it? Because *that*, TPC, is one of the many gifts that the church offers to the world. We turn ourselves towards the suffering world.

And this Fall we will be doing that in two ways that I’d like to share with you. First, we are re-igniting Sunday Community Lunch. In Sunday Community Lunch, we cook and serve a meal to those who could use a free meal, and then we go and sit down with then, and we eat with them. We enter community with them. The first informational meeting for Sunday Community Lunch is Sunday, September 18th, right after worship.

And second, the Snyder Fund at TPC is used completely for mission, and it has recently received a very sizable bequest from the Snyder estate, and the Snyder Fund Committee would love to hear from you about your ideas and passions for mission. What needs do you see in our community, our city, and the world that we, TPC, might turn towards? What mission endeavors are you already involved in outside of TPC? The first Snyder Fund Listening Session will be on Sunday, September 25th, right after worship, and I’ll also offer a gathering for our virtual community that day as well.

We invite you to come and learn about both initiatives that are happening this fall at TPC. I’m excited about both because we have Good News to share with the world. Together, we are striving to heal and transcend the divisions and barriers that consume the world. Together, we are a witness to the love of God.

Mat it be so. Amen.

1. Raynal, Charles E. *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010) p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)