



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, September 1, 2013
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
on
Luke 14:1,7-14
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THE BREAD OF HEAVEN

In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear that Jesus has been accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, and, frankly, it's not hard to see why. Jesus does many things in the Gospels, of course, but we sure do hear a lot about his eating in particular. And the people that accused him of drinking too much had perhaps heard about his first miracle at Cana: making sure the wine supply was topped off at a local wedding. He eats a lot, and he drinks a lot, and he talks about eating and drinking a lot.

That's what he is doing in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (14:1, 7-14). Jesus is at a Sabbath meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, and he sees how they jockey for the best seat. In response, he tells a parable, condemning their behavior. We should note that when we hear Jesus talking about the bad things the Pharisees are doing, here and elsewhere, we can imagine that the gospel writers are recording those things particularly relevant to their own communities; there would be no reason to record it otherwise. So if Jesus says that the Pharisees are seeking places of honor, it is quite likely that that is also what Luke was seeing in his own community of Jesus-followers. When Luke says, "Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor," and we can also read it as "Luke noticed how his community—people who should have known better—was nonetheless still choosing the places of honor." The sons of Zebedee wanted places of honor; Luke's community wanted places of honor; and maybe we want places of honor, too. The place of honor is pretty nice.

Jesus doesn't mention another reason a person might prefer to be up at the front at a banquet, sitting at Table Number 1. It's not only about prestige and being seen as important. For example, I have been at Table 25 of 25 before, just about out in the hallway, and I can tell you another problem with it: sometimes the food runs out. There will be enough steak for the first 24 tables, but then there's no more, and Table 25 gets chicken or, God forbid, the eggplant entree. The reward for going to the dessert table last may be that you end up sipping your coffee and smiling politely as others enjoy their chocolate cake. Those who humble themselves might be exalted, but they might also be hungry. Give the Pharisees a break, then, and give Luke's friends a break, too. Just as the wine ran out at Cana, there might not be enough food at this party, and maybe they were afraid of going hungry.

Maybe they were afraid. And isn't that where the problem starts? Isn't it fear that leads to that grasping and anxiety and greed, like Jesus saw? The fear of there not being enough to go

around? Perhaps these dynamics are especially clear when people are gathered together to eat, and perhaps that is why we read so frequently about Jesus' experiences at mealtimes. The Gospels make it clear: meals are different when Jesus is around. Just ask the five thousand people who sought after him and who, as night fell, started getting worried about not having dinner. Jesus took a few loaves of bread, and blessed them, and broke them, and five thousand people ate, with plenty left over. If Jesus is there, there will be plenty for everyone; don't be afraid. Lots of bread, and lots of wine. To some people who saw it, this looked like gluttony and drunkenness, but to the people who had gone hungry before it looked much different.

It also wasn't only people who had gone without food who recognized what Jesus' generosity meant. We read in the Gospels about the palpable fear of those who had gone their lives without hope, and we read about the fear and anxiety of people who were spending their lives going without enough love. They find out, when Jesus is around, what it means to have enough: enough food; enough love; and enough forgiveness.

Forgiveness: because much of Jesus' eating, after all, went on at table not with the men and women of honor, but with those of dishonor, those who were shamed in their communities. These were sinners, every one of them. More to the point, they were people who knew they were sinners, who knew how bad off they were. Jesus told them: you're loved, too; even you can be forgiven. It was not because they had earned it; they hadn't, and they couldn't. They couldn't get rid of their sins alone. Instead, they were forgiven, Jesus says, because he hands out love the way he hands out bread; give him a loaf and he'll feed a crowd, with plenty left over. The sinners knew, then, the good news of the grace of God: that there is plenty of bread, plenty of love, to go around, so none of us have to be afraid, just forgiven.

We might say, then, that there are two groups that Jesus is talking to in today's Gospel. There are those, on the one hand, who are fairly certain that they are the righteous, that they don't have much sin, really, to speak of, so they're all set. To them Jesus says: *Maxel tov!* Congratulations! But why don't you take the lower seat anyway, just in case. You wouldn't want to get stuck on the wrong side when God comes to fill the hungry with good things and sends the rich away—empty. Humble yourself, if you would, just in case.

But to the others, to those who are all too aware that they are not the righteous, to those whose sin is ever before them, to those who know that they don't only not deserve the steak or the chicken or the eggplant, but don't even deserve to gather the crumbs under the table—well, to them, Jesus says: "Friend, go up higher." Those who come to him in their weakness, not in their strength; those who acknowledge their shortcomings; those who humble themselves are exalted. To them, Jesus says, "Friend, go up higher." To those of us who are in desperate need of forgiveness, we can eat and drink with our brother Christ and with God the Father, drawn into this holy communion by the Spirit. Friend, go up higher. And we can. We can go up to his table, the holy table of the altar; it is the banquet where he is the host, so sinners are welcome, and where he is the bread, so no one goes without food, or without love, or without forgiveness. Those who are hungry, hungry for salvation, are filled, at his table, with good things.

To the righteous, it may look like gluttony and drunkenness. But to the sinners, it looks different. To me, it looks different. It looks like heaven.