



COMMUNITY  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

MINISTER  
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING  
KIM JOHNSON

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23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 5, 2004

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*Hebrews 13:1-8*  
*Luke 14:1, 7-14*

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## Eating Together

Intro: Our second New Testament lesson is from Luke. Jesus has been invited to a very fancy dinner party at the home of a Pharisee. This would be a Waterford crystal and fine bone china affair. Jesus, of course, has something to say. Let us listen for God's word to us. (READ/PRAY)

Last week we heard the clattering of pans coming from inside this big box up front. It was a day we gave thanks for many things here at CPC including the people who help prepare all the wonderful meals we enjoy. Eating together is essential to building community. There are some things we just know. Like when a four-year-old girl asks you to sit down with her for a tea party, you know that you're being invited to take part in something very special in her life. When a teenage boy brings his girlfriend home for dinner to meet the family for the first time, you know that's a significant event in their

relationship. When it is lunchtime at school, and a child breaks her candy bar in two and offers half of it to the child next to her, you know that a new friendship could start right then. Even before we are old enough to describe it, we come to know how important eating with other people is.

There's something about eating together that binds us to one another, connecting us in a very special way. In the earliest times, Christians didn't say that they came together to worship. Rather, they said they came together to break bread. Besides their hymns and prayers and scripture readings, the central focus of their gathering was to share the bread and the cup of communion each week. More than anything else, that act of eating together reminded them of who they were and what they were all about.

Throughout the Gospels, meal times are significant occasions. Communion

renews us in God's love and connects us with THE meal Jesus had with his disciples in the upper room, when he broke the bread and shared the cup. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, after the resurrection, two of Jesus' followers didn't recognize him as he was walking along the road and speaking with them. But then toward sunset, when they sat down and broke bread together, all of a sudden their eyes were opened and they saw who it was. It happened when they ate together again. Then they knew. At the end of the Gospel of John, while the disciples were eating together it was then that Jesus came to them and gave them the Holy Spirit. So eating together is no small thing scripture says.

Jesus knew how important eating together is. But he also knew that eating together could at times turn into a kind of contest. Like school children wondering and worrying about who they will sit with at lunch. At Memorial high school, there were two areas to eat and it made all the difference where you sat. The cafeteria was for the football players, cheerleaders, and popular people. The commons were for the theatre and band people. The calculus club, and folks called "B-wingers". (Don't ask.) Where you sat was dependant on who you were and how you would be identified.

That's the same mindset that was at work in Jesus' day. You had to be careful where you sat and with whom you ate, because that was how people

judged you. People went out of their way to scramble to sit down besides the most prestigious person at a dinner, because that way, they figured that made them look more important.

As Jesus sat at the dinner table that night, he watched closely and noted all the different people there were jockeying for position. Everyone there seemed to be trying their best to get the good seats. So Jesus offers some advice. He says that when you're invited to a dinner, don't take the best seat, because you run the risk that someone might ask you to move, and then you'd be embarrassed. Instead, take the lowest seat, so that maybe the host will invite you to take a better seat, and then others will look at you with respect.

Many commentators have said that this is a teaching about humility, in effect that practicing humility will save you embarrassment. Perhaps that was all Jesus intended. But I think there is a deeper meaning here. When we come to the feast where Jesus is the host whether it's the table of grace as we share communion, any time we are in the presence of God, though word or sacrament. We set aside all our normal workaday world marks of our differing status levels. At God's banquet it doesn't matter how rich or poor we may be, our sex, our orientation, our intelligence, our accomplishments, our race. None of that matters. We are there only because the host has invited

us, we because we've been designated beloved friends of Jesus Christ and therefore beloved friends of each other. No other status or qualification counts for anything. We are all distinguished and in places of honor.

To jockey for position at that banquet is embarrassing just in itself, as James and John discovered when they asked for seats of honor in the kingdom. Humility then, if this is a teaching about humility at all, means first of all gratitude and joy for the invitation to come and be an equal partner. Humility also means sharing the radical equality that is centered in Jesus Christ, not centered on some status we possess. We are first to be grateful. Humility will follow if we are truly grateful.

A few years back in an interview, the renowned actor Sir Anthony Hopkins was reflecting on his star status. "When you're young," he said, "you crave power and fame. Now I know it's ... no big deal. I get up and look into the mirror and say, 'Oh, it's you again.' I assume he smiles when he says that to himself (I hope he does) with a slight shake of the head that implies, "I know who you are: a flawed human being who doesn't deserve all that comes your way, but life is a gift!"

If that is true, what a wonderful model for us: true humility grounded in gratitude and joy. But how difficult to imitate! How seriously we take ourselves. How we puff ourselves up,

or tear ourselves down- both of these are forms of arrogance. How hard it is to look in the mirror and neither to frown nor to genuflect, but without pride or condemnation to smile and say, "Oh, it's you again."

Thinking too much or too little of ourselves are forms of arrogance and untruth. Thinking of either kind postulates its own reality, creates its own universe centered on itself, denying our true limitations and our real abilities. Arrogance lives a lie. When our hearts are not centered on God but centered on ourselves. Arrogance is easy to diagnose in someone else. We can see it in our elected officials. (Take your pick) So many have seemed to have forgotten that public office is a sacred trust, given for leadership and service, not for exploitation and self-aggrandizement.

The arrogance in us that constantly urges us to put ourselves at the center of our universe to view others with suspicion, and to use others for our own purposes causes us to fall frequently. As limited human beings, "sinner" is part of our identity. When we sin, our arrogance seems to give us two choices. One is to deny it to smooth things over, to excuse ourselves and so puff ourselves up some more. The other is to punish ourselves for it, to tear ourselves down over it', to use it to continue to take ourselves with a deadly seriousness. Just don't do it, is Jesus simple advice.

By eating with those who have less than us, by eating with those whom we may think are less than us, Jesus says that if we do that, we'll put ourselves in the position of receiving something valuable that they have to offer. And that is the knowledge that life is not about what others think of us. Instead, life is knowing that we are accepted by God, and being grateful for that is all that matters. In centuries past, the judge who condemned a murderer to death would share the sacrament of the Lord's Supper with him before his execution. By doing that, the judge was in effect saying, "You are a sinner who has done great wrong, and society is punishing you for what you did. But nonetheless, you are still the property of God, just like me and every other person."

We are all the property of God. Distinguished guests at God's joyous banquet where all are equally loved. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. We all have the same special place in God's care. If we think that prestige, if we think that sitting next to the right person at dinner is what matters most in life, then we're going to end up being disappointed. This morning our host, Jesus, stands and says to us "come with me. Come not to the place that you have prepared for yourself. But come and sit at the place at my table that I have prepared for you." Be my guest. Amen.