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St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet

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Jesus' Rules for Entertaining

Suzanne Pollak Williamson – *Entertaining for Dummies*

“Most people invite the same two or three couples over for dinner, and what happens is that you end up talking about the same thing.” The boring results, she explains, is that, “the conversation just picks up where it left off at the last party...To keep the conversation fresh, Williamson suggests that one should “invite a scandalous acquaintance or an intellectual with something to say that everyone wants to hear.”

Now, I ask you, who would that be? Who would you invite to your next dinner party? A survey of recent college graduates reported that Jesus was top of the list of their dream guest list.

I don't know how popular Jesus actually was as a dinner guest, but I do know that our Lord liked parties and did a lot of “table talk.” Some of Jesus' most significant discourses, miracles, radical acts and resurrection appearances take place at the dinner table or around a meal: the wedding at Cana, the feeding of the multitudes, the healing of the man with dropsy; the anointing by Mary Magdalene; the washing of feet; the institution of the Lord's Supper; and my favorite, breakfast on the beach.

Jesus recognized that table companionship – those with whom we eat – made a powerful social commentary and a wonderful teaching opportunity. Our Lord believed and behaved as if all of life was a banquet hosted by God: a party with an open invitation, a table with many seatings, a meal overflowing with the variety and abundance of creation so that all the guests could be satisfied, and plenty of leftovers to be shared with those who for varied reasons couldn't get there in time.

It was Jesus' mission on earth to help us clearly see God's intentions for the abundance of divine grace: to help us to understand and follow God's rules for table etiquette, as much as (if not more) than we follow those offered by Ms. Manners, Emily Post or Amy Sedaris.

What are these rules, you might ask? They can be summed up in two words: humility and hospitality. If we human beings lived according to God's rules of humility and hospitality, we would realize more than a foretaste of the Eschatological Banquet. If we lived according to God's way of humility and hospitality, we would probably experience the Realm of God on earth.

First century dining had some very particular customs. People ate with their own kind and kin. It was customary for the men to eat at the table while the women cooked, served and ate in the kitchen. Only the rich ate at leisure. In fact, they ate reclining on couches with pillows. Poor people usually ate their one meal a day standing up. That's the importance of the mandate of the Passover: to eat leisurely and welcome sojourners and strangers.

There also was a difference between an ordinary meal and a party. Banquet seating was at a three-sided table. People were seated according to their status in life: The more important the guest, the closer to the head of the table. It's really not so different from today - think about the seating arrangements at weddings, fundraisers, and ceremonial dinners. Through table companionship, one cultivated a society of one's own kind, and the Pharisees raised this to a spiritual principle.

In this morning's Gospel story, Jesus is an invited guest at a dinner party - a banquet given by a leader of the Pharisees. The line, "they were watching him closely," leads us to believe that Jesus was probably the "scandalous acquaintance or the intellectual with something to say that everyone wants to hear." Without a doubt, the host and other table companions were testing Jesus. And what did Jesus do?

First, he asked a provocative question about healing on the Sabbath. When he got no response, he then healed the man with dropsy.

After this, he agitated the situation further by commenting in parable on the seating arrangements. Waiting until everyone was seated at his or her various places of honor, Jesus told a story that could be interpreted on many levels: economic, social, political, and even theological. It was a tale of polar reversal. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

After insulting the party guests, Jesus then insulted his host by criticizing his invitation list. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, don't invite your friends and relatives who can reciprocate. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who cannot repay you."

Can you imagine such a scene? A recent college graduate, perhaps one of those surveyed, has her first major dinner party to celebrate her new high-powered job with a prestigious firm. She invites some of her potentially important colleagues and their spouses. She is ready to impress them with her new apartment, her new dining room furniture, her new tableware, and her newly acquired gourmet cooking skills. She also gets her dream come true – Jesus is among the invited guests. But there is one hitch; our hostess is not allowed to tell anyone who he is.

The dinner guests arrive. They have their cocktails and move to the dining room. Her old friends jockey for a good seat at the table; Jesus sits down quietly at the far end of the table.

Just as everyone begins to eat, Jesus first insults the guests for their jockeying for power spots at the table. And then to add insult to injury, he turns to the hostess and says, “Next time you have a dinner party, why don’t you invite the men living in the shelter at your church, or the secretaries in your office, or the busboy at your favorite restaurant, or even your cleaning person, instead of these new colleagues you’re trying to impress.”

I don’t know what I would have done in her place. I do know that in this morning’s gospel, Jesus teaches some important and difficult lessons about humility and hospitality. If God is the host of Jesus’ dinner party, the parable suggests that God raises us up out of our own humility, and God humbles us out of our own arrogance and self-importance.

Later on in the Gospel, Jesus clarified this teaching for his closest disciples when he said that those who seek to lead in his name must be willing to serve his followers. If we are the hosts of a dinner party, then God expects no less of us.

We are called to welcome the stranger into our community and our lives, and not just strangers who look and act like us; rather, we are to invite strangers who might be very different from us, but who none-the-less are invited to join the party.

A party is a risky act of faith on the part of the host who wants to offer joy and believes that his or her guests are worth the effort. It’s a risk for the host who doesn’t know if anybody will show up, too many people will show up, or there will be enough food and drink to go around. In hosting a party, we risk that we won’t have enough chairs for people to sit, that somebody might spill wine on our favorite chair, or break grandmother’s antique chair. There also is a risk that the guests might not

get along, someone might say or do something inappropriate, or we might have to deal unexpectedly with someone's pain or grief causing a guest to present him or herself more as a stranger than a friend.

The dinner party, as a metaphor for Gospel living, is not about cultivating a society of one's own kind, or getting ahead through entertaining. Rather, the dinner party is about celebrating life with your neighbor, crossing the boundaries of race and class, and sharing the bounty of the harvest with those less fortunate than you. That's what it means to "let mutual love continue while showing hospitality to strangers."

In a place where so many come to vacation, rest, and re-create, in a community where so many come to find acceptance, creativity and freedom; and others come to find work, Jesus' social commentary and teaching about humility and hospitality is very real. Every summer, I witness residents, workers, artists, and business owners offer extraordinary hospitality to strangers, and I too often watch visitors behave as if they are in need of both Jesus' and Emily Post's etiquette books.

So this morning, as I bid you farewell till next summer, I want to offer you thanks for your generous hospitality. I so enjoy your companionship. I also want to leave you with a few questions to ponder over the winter months. Who needs the hospitality of this wonderful summer chapel where land, sky and sea meet? To whom is God calling us to provide safe harbor, to not only welcome but also seek? Who needs to be invited to Christ's banquet in this place? And, to those of you who are summer hosts, how might you offer hospitality in ways that are life-giving to both your guests and you? And who should be at your dinner parties in the future? And finally, as we depart from one another, may we all remember that in the giving and receiving of hospitality with humility, we might "entertain angels unaware."

Amen!