

Rethinking the Table  
Luke 14:1, 7-14  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
June 23, 2019  
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I recently read an article titled, “In Praise of Scruffy Hospitality.” In it Robin Shreeves talks about her journey toward the kind of hospitality that welcomes people in even when the house isn’t neat and tidy, the kind that is willing to invite folks into the authentic mess of our lives and trust that they are there for friendship and not a house inspection. She quotes Father Jack King who defines “scruffy hospitality” this way: *Scruffy hospitality means you’re not waiting for everything in your house to be in order before you host and serve friends in your home. Scruffy hospitality means you hunger more for good conversation and serving a simple meal of what you have, not what you don’t have. Scruffy hospitality means you’re more interested in quality conversation than the impression your home or lawn makes. If we only share meals with friends when we’re excellent, we aren’t truly sharing life together.*<sup>1</sup>

When I read today’s text, this idea of scruffy hospitality came to mind. It’s not that Jesus talks about having people in when your house isn’t totally clean. It’s not that Jesus talks about trusting that you can invite people for a potluck and not feel the pressure to provide the whole meal. But what Jesus does do in the text we read today is to ask us to rethink the table. In this case, not how clean the house is or if there are enough seats or if the meal is well coordinated, but Jesus asks us to rethink our assumptions and instincts about who we are with at the table.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.mnn.com/your-home/at-home/blogs/in-priase-scruffy-hospitality?fbclid=IwAR39\\_4nz-ntsVVDfN1nMJDeHyZz7r3TFOdR0HMMmycbOlpDRH8TLt40nFO4](https://www.mnn.com/your-home/at-home/blogs/in-priase-scruffy-hospitality?fbclid=IwAR39_4nz-ntsVVDfN1nMJDeHyZz7r3TFOdR0HMMmycbOlpDRH8TLt40nFO4)

And if it seems hard to imagine hosting a meal without your house freshly cleaned, then it may seem even harder to imagine sitting down at the table with people you don't know, people who aren't like you, or people with whom people you are uncomfortable.

And yet, that's just what Jesus asks of us.

Today's reading comes from the Gospel of Luke. Here in chapter 14, in the context of Jesus being at the home of a religious leader for a meal, he shares a series of table stories that all ask the people to rethink their assumptions and practices. We read two of those stories today.

And let us not miss that "meals were of profound theological significance for Luke."<sup>2</sup> When we hear a story at the table, we should take note and realize that something unexpected or challenging or enlightening is about to happen. This is true of stories like the ones we read today and it is true of stories like the one at the end of the gospel where Jesus is made known, after the resurrection, in the act of breaking bread. Throughout the stories of Jesus' life the table and the sharing of bread become points of connection, of breaking down barriers, of care, of community, of discovery and so much more.

As Fred Craddock wrote, "Breaking bread was important. In fact, the real test of whether the church included persons who were different was not at the point of baptizing them but of eating with them (Acts 11:1-3). Fellowship meals were central in the church's life together."<sup>3</sup>

And they are no less central in the life of faith communities or communities in general today. A lot can be said about us by watching who we eat with and how we welcome – or don't welcome – people to our tables. And if we're listening, Jesus just might challenge our practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year C* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 393.

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, 393.

Because that's what happened here in today's reading. In two different parables about the table, Jesus asked people to rethink what they were doing there.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor..." begins the first. And Jesus goes on saying – sit in a less honorable seat so that if you are moved, you are moved to a more honorable position instead of choosing the table with the richest or the most influential people and then being told that your seat was down there. We can hear this simply as being about humility. And it is that. But even more than that, or even more than motivating us to feign humility so that we are always being sought out and moved to a better seat, this passage connects us back to the decisions we make about where we sit and who we sit with.

And we make these decisions all the time. In so many ways our decisions about the tables we sit at and the people we eat with are decisions about the status we want to project. They are often made based on established relationships or desired connections, but rarely do we choose a place to sit where we seek out someone who is different or who society considers "less than".

But Jesus asks us to rethink our tables.

And then the challenge continues as Jesus goes on and says that not only should we sit in the less desirable seats, but we should go out of our way to choose to invite not only our friends and coworkers, not only those who can repay us or invite us next time, but those who really need the meal, those who might not have a meal without us, those who we might only see according to their label – sick or poor or outcast or other – but who God sees as beloved child.

Again, Jesus asks us to rethink our tables.

And the opportunities for us to do so are plentiful.

A pastor in her first year of seminary and was attending General Assembly. The morning of business had finished up. Lunch break had come. She and a friend walked alongside throngs of others leaving the convention center hoping to find a restaurant nearby and to beat the others in the crowd so as to not be in line too long. Focused on their task they walked past those sitting along the sidewalks, rattling cans of change, asking for help and saying, “God bless you” to the passersby, them included, who worked hard to not make eye contact. They got to a nearby restaurant and found their place in line. The door continued to open and close behind them as others gathered as well. And a few people behind them in line they noticed another Assembly-goer. But rather than being with a friend for lunch he was standing next to one of the men they had seen a block away begging on the street. A fellow Disciple, had not only made eye contact, but had invited the stranger to dinner. And these two young seminarians, sitting in their comfort zone with each other, were left rethinking the table.

A couple was traveling by train for the weekend. Their trip wasn’t long, but they happened to be traveling over mealtime. The announcement came over the loudspeaker – the dining car was open. They looked at each other – this might be a fun experience and the food would surely be better than chips or a microwaved pizza from the snack bar. Off they went. Upon entering the server asked how many were in their party. “Two,” they replied. And he pointed them to a table to the left...a table where two other people were already sitting. They paused for a moment, unsure if they understood correctly. He pointed again and led them that way. Yes, they were being seated with strangers. Fast-forward an hour and strangers had become friends, people who were just different enough from them by the measures of demographics had become an important connection. And when they left the train that day they were rethinking the table.

A middle-aged couple traveled to an African country to visit their daughter. After some confusion in communication, they arrived at the airport two hours earlier than she was scheduled to pick them up. There they stood in a strange country, having not had a meal for many hours, tired and hungry and not sure what to do while they waited. Apparently the looks on their faces showed their dilemma and a stranger approached them. The stranger was clearly Muslim and was in a car with other traveling companions. Upon hearing their story and discovering that they were hungry and unable to call their daughter to let her know they had arrived, the stranger and their companions responded. They pulled something from the car which ended up being a pop-up table. Soon it was set with fruits and drinks, main dishes and dessert – food prepared for them to eat at sunset when they could break the Ramadan fast. In addition to food, a phone was made available and these Muslim companions kept the couple company until their daughter arrived. And in that encounter this American couple was left rethinking the table.

We are a congregation who has embraced the phrase, “There’s Room at the Table for Everyone.” And we mean it. Or at least we try to mean it. But even with it written on our banners and t-shirts, still we have room to grow as we continue to explore what full inclusion means. Because this phrase, on our sanctuary walls, isn’t just about the communion table. For us, that’s the easy part – to share communion with anyone who enters this room on a Sunday morning. But it is about so much more.

And while in so many ways we have done an amazing job of welcoming the stranger, including those who are not like us and celebrating the diversity around us – it is important to remember we have not fully arrived. In fact, this work is and will be ongoing.

Since being at the table with another is about recognizing their humanity, about opening our lives up to be impacted by theirs, about leveling the playing field, it is no accident that when Jesus asks us to rethink how we do community, he uses table imagery.

And remember, this means the tables we eat at as well as the tables we make decisions at. This invitation to rethink the table is an invitation to step outside our comfort zones, to see people for their humanity and their giftedness beyond our preconceived ideas and stereotypes, to open ourselves up to being a community that truly reflects God's kin-dom.

Friends, this is our desire and it is our challenge...to rethink the table that in very real ways in our very real lives, our community and our hearts will truly be open to everyone.