



Station 6

TABLE ETIQUETTE 2 HOSPITALITY—"INVITE EVERYONE YOU FIND TO THE BANQUET"

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

—Hebrews 13:2

Nothing is more natural than for people to break bread together. Sharing food at table is one of the universal ways that relationships are created. Patterns of table fellowship can be studied to identify social groups: families, friendship networks, communities, and whole cultures. The word for the social patterns created by eating together is "commensality," which the dictionary defines as "fellowship at table; the act or practice of eating at the same table.¹ The tables we gather around are infinitely varied. There are family dinner tables, worksite canteens, buffet tables at community suppers, fancy restaurant tables, the simple rock or log of a picnic site, school cafeterias, soup kitchen tables, and church altars. The patterns of food sharing and the ethos of the group that gathers around each of these tables, its commensality, are different. What, then, is the commensality of the banquet table? What is the table etiquette of God's hospitality?

¹ Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc.

VOICES FROM THE TRADITION

Jesus' table fellowship, the company he kept, his enjoyment of food, and his attention to the customary "rules" of the table are not tangential to his ministry. Rather, they define his ministry and us as his followers.

In the typical pattern of table fellowship, one invites relatives, friends, and neighbors usually with similar social standing. Jesus reverses that pattern: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid" (Luke 14:12). The table for Jesus is not about building up a cohesive web of mutual obligation among relatives or near neighbors. Rather, in the spirit of the banquet table, Jesus suggests: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13). In this attention to the vulnerable and excluded, Jesus is drawing on clear and honored roots in his Jewish tradition.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deut 10:17-19).

Attention to the needs of the widow, orphan, and stranger or resident alien is part of faithful covenant practice.² Those who have no benefactors do have a place and a claim on the community. They have some entitlements.

Jesus honors and radicalizes this tradition. In Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet, the king's invited guests are like the seed sown among the thorns: "The cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing" (Mark 4:19). They decline the invitation to the banquet. "They would not come." The king then says to his slaves: "'Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom

² See Exod 22:21-27; Deut 14:28-29; 16:13-15; 24:14-22; 27:18, 19, and the equivalent tradition among the prophets: Isaiah 1; Jeremiah 7; Ezekiel 22; Zechariah 7; Malachi 3.

they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matt 22:9-10; parallel Luke 14:16-24). What does it mean to invite everyone and anyone to the banquet, "both good and bad"?³ What is the meaning or implication of such an open, inclusive, non-discriminating invitation to table?

As Dominic Crossan points out: "A feast for society's outcasts could easily be understood . . . as a benefaction." It could be understood within a tradition of benevolence as a charitable act of taking care of those in need. Yet, the "everyone" is provocative. It means anyone, and that "anyone negates the very social function of table, namely, to establish a social ranking by what one eats, how one eats, and with whom one eats. . . . One could, in such a situation have classes, sexes, ranks and grades all mixed up together."⁴ The banquet is clearly about more than benevolence. "The good and bad," the righteous and unrighteous, rich and poor are all together at the banquet table. The ethos of Jesus' table fellowship is rooted in a vision that is about something more than maintaining a coherent, compatible, even charitable community.

The shape of Jesus' ministry and the nature of this wedding banquet are tightly intertwined. Jesus' actual table companions were very diverse. They included "the good and the bad" together.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—or there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:15-17; parallels: Matt 9:10-13; Luke 5:29-32).

Jesus does not do away with categorizations of people, but he radically changes their meaning. The "sinners" are not shunned or excluded. Rather, they are his table companions, the focus of his love.

³ Luke underlines this question by extending this part of the story into a two-stage process: first, the host of the great dinner says: "bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"; then, because there is still room, the host continues: "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in" (Luke 14:21, 23).

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 262.

Not only does Jesus keep dubious company at his table, but he clearly enjoys the table:

To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep."

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children (Luke 7:31-35; parallel Matt 11:16-18).

Jesus' reputation, his identity, was defined by his unusual table etiquette: "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Although he knew hunger,⁵ fasting was not part of his pattern of life:

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day" (Mark 2:18-20; parallels Matt 9:14-15; Luke 5:33-35).

The tenor of Jesus' table was joy and fullness to overflowing.⁶ There is no evidence of a body-denying or purifying ethos. There is no evidence of the creation of an exclusive table group. Rather, there seems to be a delight in the gifts of creation and an embrace of all the different people in his midst.

All cultures have "rules" or generally recognized acceptable patterns of behavior at table and understandings about what counts as accept-

⁵ Beyond the forty days of fasting which preceded Jesus' temptations, both Matthew (21:18) and Mark (11:12) testify to Jesus' experience of hunger: "he was hungry."

⁶ Stations 10 and 12 extend this theme.

able food.⁷ These shared expectations often serve the function of defining who can share a table and who is excluded, who is part of the group and who is not. Jewish culture in Jesus' day was no exception. But Jesus did not follow the customary "rules" of his time. "Together, [Jesus'] open commensality and free healing symbolized the shattering of social boundaries and affirmed unbrokered access to God [a sharing of material and spiritual resources], both revolutionary actions in a world constituted by boundaries and brokerage."⁸ Marcus Borg interprets Jesus' approach as holiness rooted in the "politics of compassion." Jesus emphasized inclusion, the renewal of relationships, and access of all to the fullness of God's love. In contrast, the Pharisees, another reform movement within the Jewish community of Jesus' day, pursued holiness as careful adherence to traditional principles and practices of the faith. In contrast to Jesus' emphasis on inclusion, the Pharisee's approach required members to separate themselves from the culture into a distinct group defined by their intentional pursuit of holiness. Their practices created clear boundaries and a unique identity for the group. It also created distinctions among members as different life circumstances permitted such separation and the full pursuit of all the prescribed practices. Many of the debates about Jesus' table fellowship are about the contrast between the principles and social visions of these two reform movements.

One example is the debate about the accepted pattern of hand washing, which Mark notes as one aspect of a larger set of food "rules":

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat

⁷ Food anthropologists have studied these food and table "rules" extensively. See Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) for an example of the application of that discipline to Leviticus with its "law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten" (Lev 11:46-47).

⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict; Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998) 5.

anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:1-5; parallel Matt 15:1, 2).

Jesus first addresses the Pharisees, but then turns to the crowd, and generalizes the issue:

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:14-23; parallel Matt 15:10-20).

At this level of first principles, the radical core of Jesus’ practice emerges. It is not that Jesus’ path is without “rules” or a sense of righteousness or holiness. For Jesus, protection against what harms or defiles, and, therefore more generally, the pursuit of holiness, is *not* an issue of boundaries, of what is in and out, an issue of the stomach. It is not about separation from the world. Rather, it is a matter of the conversion of the heart. Jesus’ focus on compassion as the root of holiness places the accent of his table etiquette on the invitation to the banquet, on inclusion, on building relationships. By altering the understanding of table rules, Jesus changes the boundaries of community. There is a place at the table for everyone.

The openness of Jesus’ table was not only a challenge for the religious authorities of his day and for his disciples. Even Jesus struggled with the boundaries of the table. Any table “rule” can become a boundary and a defining feature of a bounded community. In both Mark and Matthew, there is the account of Jesus’ conversation with the Syrophoenician woman:

From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (Mark 7:24-30; parallel Matt 15:21-28).

Jesus is able to listen to the woman’s argument, extend his heart, and change his mind. The gifts of Jesus’ ministry⁹ and grace of his table are not limited by traditional group boundaries. In fact, there are no barriers to Jesus’ table except self-imposed ones.¹⁰

Just as the implications of the etiquette of love developed into a politics of compassion during Jesus’ ministry, so there was much contention about the implications of this etiquette of hospitality for community life in the early Church. The church in Corinth offers several examples of this struggle. One was about food rules: What foods could be eaten? In particular, should food from pagan temples be eaten? Differentiation among acceptable foods is often associated with differentiation among eating situations and therefore the people who are a part of those events. In addressing these food rules, Paul stresses the openness and freedom of the gospel: “All things are lawful,” but he adds, “not all things are beneficial . . . not all things build up” (1 Cor 10:23). Our freedom is to be tempered by care for others. There is no preset simple rule for the discernment of the path of freedom conditioned by the table etiquette of love, but Paul offers the guideline: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

⁹ Several of Jesus’ healing miracles have food or table references: Matt 8:11 and parallel; Mark 1:30-31; Mark 5:43; John 12:1-2; as of course do several of his resurrection appearances: Luke 24:30, 34, 41, 42; John 21.

¹⁰ Judas leaves the table of the Last Supper; the brother of the prodigal son cannot be persuaded to join the banquet (Station 11); and the rich man cannot follow (Station 8).

How open was the table to be? Peter struggled with this question early in the life of the Church. The vision he was given that allowed Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to sit at table without “distinction” was about the food rules of the purity code in Leviticus. It is told twice as if for emphasis.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:1-12; Acts 10:1-36).

Christ’s way is not about distinctions or separation among foods or people, but love of God and neighbor. It is about open hospitality and an etiquette of inclusion.

But even that is not saying enough. Not only does the inclusivity of the open table work to diminish distinctions of access to the table, it is also invoked to address enmity. Quoting Proverbs 25:21 and 22, Paul writes: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:20-21).

This is the very antithesis of the too common practice of withholding food to induce or coerce a change of heart among antagonists. In the radical inclusivity of Jesus’ ethic of love there is no place for the use of food as a weapon (Matt 5:43-48). In times of great insecurity, oppression, and change when there is much to fear, not just strangers

but even those antagonistic to us have a place at the table.¹¹ Compassion rules.

Not only are there to be no distinctions in invitation to the banquet, there are to be no distinctions at the table. Not only is there a place for everyone at the table, those places are not to be arranged by status.

When [Jesus] noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and 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. But 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 honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:7-11).

Just as with Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, so here too Jesus’ table etiquette subverts status differentiation. However, it does not come naturally. It is a pattern of relating that has to be learned.

The lesson had to be learned and relearned in the early Church. We hear James correcting all the ways that even today we make distinctions among ourselves by the places that are assigned:

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and

¹¹ The Old Testament offers a story of just such a feast. In the chaos of the closing days of his reign, Saul consults a medium, even though he had expressly forbidden “mediums and wizards from the land.” Yet the woman, seeing Saul’s distress and imminent destruction, has compassion and serves Saul and his servants a feast that he might have strength to go on his way (1 Samuel 29). Ironically, counter-examples come from David’s children (2 Samuel 13). “Under the pretense of requesting a meal, Amnon raped Tamar; under the pretense of offering Amnon a meal, Absalom murders his brother. Throughout, this allusion to a meal is evocative, for a meal should conjure up a covenant ceremony, a symbolic gesture of cohesion, instead of a bloodbath.” Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 100.

become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor (Jas 2:2-6a).

Similarly, but with more irony, Paul writes to “admonish” the church in Corinth for similar pretensions (1 Cor 4:8-13). Even the disciples were offered lesson after lesson. In the midst of their discussion about who was the greatest among them, Jesus draws a child into their midst. “Taking [the child] in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’” (Mark 9:36b-37; Luke 9:46-48; Matt 18:1-5). Our hospitality to the least is our hospitality to the Holy. It seems that every generation in the Church must learn the subversive table etiquette of the banquet.

Paul encapsulates the heart of the radical, open commensality of Jesus’ table:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:26-29).

No distinctions are made at Christ’s table: no “us” and “them,” up and down, in and out, greater or lesser distinctions, neither by faith, race, class, age, or gender. It is not that differences are erased or become meaningless. It is the meaning that we make of them that matters. For example, Jesus never negated his Jewishness. Rather, it was in his faithfulness to his ancestry that he could bring the invitation to the fullness of the banquet to those who had been excluded from those promises.

In the midst of the quarrelsome, divisive church in Corinth, we can hear Paul’s advice for negotiating difference without distinction:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12:12-13).

There is one table, one body in Christ. Paul’s insistence on “oneness,” on inclusion regardless of our differences, is not at the expense of difference or the uniqueness of the “varieties of gifts . . . services . . . activities” the Spirit has given the members (1 Cor 12:4-6). It is rather to build up the integrity of the whole *with* our differences, not *in spite of* them. This is the oneness of Pentecost, not the totalitarian oneness of Babel. Our diversity serves the whole: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). In this sense of the common good there is such a web of interdependent relationship, that we know that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). This is the image of the oneness that Jesus weaves, then and now, in his radical open table commensality.

But how quickly oneness, even a oneness that honors difference, can become an over-against-another oneness. How easily we can begin to argue about the correctness or rightness or appropriateness of one etiquette versus another. And how intense those arguments can become when it is faith that divides us. But, Christ’s table is different from other tables around which people gather, for Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection cast a permanent suspicion over all passionately drawn and defended boundaries.¹² Jesus took his faith outside the city walls, into the company of tax collectors and sinners, thieves and criminals, into the company of the forsaken, even into the silence of the dead, to invite all—everyone and anyone—to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE: SOLIDARITY

Dorothee Soelle recounts an old Jewish story which captures the promise of this table etiquette:

An old rabbi once asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins. “Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” one student asked. “No,” said the rabbi. “Is

¹² See Gil Bailie’s outline of the revolutionary implications of this suspicion in *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).