

Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It all begins with a meal. One of many
that Jesus no doubt shared
when he was on the road with his disciples
those three years
before his death.

Meals
and hospitality
have always been central
in Middle Eastern culture.
What began as a necessity in a place
where the sun was harsh
and water too often scarce
and travelers needed
whatever substance they could get
on the road
has become a central characteristic of the culture.
It's true even today.

When I was on sabbatical five years ago,
I visited Petra,
that incredible ancient Nabatean city
cut into the rock.
There were stalls by the sides of many of the paths,
some of them elaborate, shops really,
but others
just a woman - the small ones were mostly run by women, while the men acted as guides
or rented out donkeys -
just a woman under a makeshift tent
with small selection of jewelry or handcrafts.
Most of them
also had a small portable stove
and simmering away on it
a pan of mint tea.
And if you lingered long enough
they would invite you to share some tea with them.

I drank a lot of mint tea that trip,
and bought a lot of small gifts.

Yes, it was good business -
after accepting tea from someone, you can hardly not by something -
but it was also about hospitality,
connecting with people
in a harsh and fierce landscape.

I experienced the same hospitality in Jerusalem one morning
when I stopped at a shop in the old city
that sold beads.
After browsing for a while,
I began to chat with the owner.
Then his friend arrived
with fresh baked bread
and soft white cheese,
and they invited me to share breakfast,
bread and cheese and strong cardamom scented coffee.

I will never forget
those moments
of hospitality.

So it's not surprising to read
time after time in the gospels,
stories about Jesus sharing meals
as he travelled.

There's the time when Jesus saw Zacchaeus
up in the tree
and told him
he was coming for dinner.
And the wedding feast
when Jesus turned water into wine.
And of course, the feeding of the five thousand.

This time
the meal was in the house of a religious leader.
Apparently

it was not just ordinary people
who were interested in Jesus.
It was the religious leaders as well -
they seem to have often invited him for a meal.
Or perhaps it wasn't real interest
but simply that
they wanted to keep an eye on him.
Anyway,
this day
Jesus was invited to have dinner
at the home
of a religious leader.
And when he got there,
he noticed
that people were very concerned
about where they got to sit.
Some people
were clearly accustomed
to sitting in the most prestigious place
right by the host.
Others
must have been invited
to make up the numbers;
they seemed almost embarrassed to be there
and tried to make themselves
as inconspicuous
as they could.

As he watched the guests
jockeying for space
you could see Jesus
watching,
and it wasn't long
before he began to speak.

You know,
he said,
It's not very clever
when you're invited to a meal
to choose the best seat.

Because you probably don't know
who else is invited.

And what if someone
more important than you
is invited?

If you've taken the best seat,
then you're going to have to deal with the embarrassment of relinquishing it
and moving to whatever seat is vacant
somewhere else at the table.

But if choose a seat at the bottom of the table,
the worst that can happen
is that you will have to stay there.

But more likely
you'll be invited to move up.
It's kind of common sense.

But Jesus wasn't just talking about dinner tables.

He was talking
about the way
that we all behave
in our everyday lives.

We all face the temptation
to think of ourselves
and our needs and desires
as more important
than anyone else.

But what if
we're not the most important in the room?

And so he said,

“those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Just like, on other occasions, he said,

“the first shall be last
and the last shall be first.”

By this time
you can imagine
what the dinner table was like.

The people

who had seated themselves
in the best places
were looking either outraged
or embarrassed,
and the people in the lesser places
mostly just wanted to go home.

And then Jesus
turned to the host.
“When you put on a meal,
don’t just invite your relatives and friends,
people who you are comfortable with
and who will no doubt
invite you back.
Go look for the people
who never get invited anywhere.
People who don’t have much, or don’t know anyone.
People that most of us
pass by without a glance.”

And again
you can imagine those within earshot
getting uncomfortable.
They’d come to have dinner
with one of their community’s
most repeated leaders.
Who had invited the person
who the whole country was talking about.
But now
there was the distinct possibility
that the guest list might include
not just the usual crowd,
neighbors and businesses acquaintances and friends,
it might include
the guy who sat begging
down on the edge of town,
and the old lady who couldn’t walk very far
and so hardly ever
made it to the river to bathe,
and that new family

who just didn't fit in.

So I wonder what would happen
if Jesus joined some of our meals
here at St James?
If meals are, as Jesus seems to think
not just central
as a place of hospitality
but reflect the way
we live the rest of our lives,
what would Jesus say
if he were here.

Of course, the central meal
of our life together here at St James
is the Eucharist.
This is the meal
where we gather in Christ's name
and share together
bread and wine,
his body and blood.
The Eucharist, along with baptism,
are the two things
that distinguish us as Christians.
We are baptized
into the body of Christ,
and as the body of Christ
we share
in the Eucharist.

And everyone
is welcome.
One of the best things about being a priest
is standing behind the communion rail
watching you all come up for the Eucharist.
There are no highest and lowest positions;
the order
is based simply on where you sit - and we have no assigned seating.
Some people stand
and some kneel.

Some are dressed to the hilt
and some much more casual.
Some of our youngest members
open their mouths like little birds;
others out their hands out,
some calloused and some smooth,
some with ingrained dirt
 and some with veins and arteries prominent.

All of them, coming together,
as one body
of Christ.

It's why I love
that we share a common cup
in the chalice
rather than the option preferred
in some other denominations
of having little individual serves.
Sharing the cup
reflects our belief
that we are one in Christ,
that we belong together.

It's the same reason
I prefer to use large wafers that we break
 or even a loaf of bread
rather than the little individual circles.
Because the symbol is important.
We are the body of Christ, together.
The Eucharist is not just an individual act of piety;
it is something we do together,
that binds us to one another
and to Christ.
And Christ is present, not just to each of us by ourselves
but here among us as we worship.
It's a foretaste
of that great banquet feast
of the kingdom of heaven.

But sometimes I wonder about the other times we eat together.
Do we pay attention to what Jesus says then?

After the unity of the Eucharist,
sometimes coffee hour
is a marked contrast.
People talk with their friends.
There's a table of guys
talking about golf,
and some women sharing photos of grandchildren,
and down the back
some families with small kids.
For all we might be united in worship
we tend to be divided at coffee hour.
And I wonder what Jesus
would have to say to that?

When we are at coffee hour
do we just talk with our friends?
Or do we make an effort to reach out to people
we don't know so well,
people we might not have
so much in common with?
Do we welcome
those who don't look quite like us?
Who don't fit in so well?
Do we even know the names
of the people
who aren't already
our friends?

You see, Jesus' words are challenging.
It's one thing
to gather around the Eucharist
and find unity there.
It's another
to take that radical hospitality,
that commitment to be together
beyond this liturgical space.
To make an effort
to follow Jesus' words.
To reach out to those

who are not as well established.
To get to know people
you might not ordinarily cross paths with.
To make this a community
not just in worship
but in life.

And as Jesus says, if you do
you will be blessed.