

Amenities

Reading from the Old Testament: Proverbs 25:6-7

Reading from the New Testament: Luke 14:1, 7-14

“Ernest T, there’s something we need to talk about, and that’s the way you come into a room.” In a classic Andy Griffith episode flavored by a Pygmalion plot, the good sheriff has committed to the foolhardy task of transforming the irascible, uncouth hermit from the holler, Ernest T. Bass, into a respectably suave eligible bachelor. “Now you’ve got to remember that when you come into a room full of strangers, they judge you by the first time they see you ... Barney, why don’t you show Ernest T the proper way to come into a room ... You see, Barney is a perfect example of a young man about town ... Granted on the outside he looks like another tough, weatherbeaten lawman, but coming through that rough exterior, that rough hide is a sophisticated, well-mannered gentleman.”

His ego stroked, Deputy Barney Fife suddenly warms up to the idea of mentoring Ernest T on the social graces, yet in a way that only Barney can muster. Before he demonstrates a properly urbane and debonair way to walk into a room, Barney has to know details: “What kind of gathering is it?” *Um, social.* “Formal or semi-formal?” *Neckties.* “Any city officials?” *No,*

just folks. “How many people?” To which Andy retorts, *Are you going to enter, or are you planning on bringing the sandwiches?* Riled, Barney reacts, “There are different entrances for different affairs!”

So, Barney proceeds to demonstrate via silent role play, an over-the-top, operatic entree complete with silent greetings and the polished niceties of the socialite, leaving Ernest T no less befuddled. “I can’t hear ’im!” “Doggone it, Ernest T, them are the amenities. Now, you don’t yell amenities.” *I can’t hear your ameninies!*

Well, Ernest T, I’ve never quite figured out the *ameninies* myself. Most of the restaurants I frequent have but one fork, and that may well be plastic. I’ve never owned a tuxedo, or met a debutante, or eaten at the cool kids’ table, or been included in the B-list much less the A-list among preachers. When it comes to the mores of social sorting, I am ill-equipped, poorly prepped, and a mite bit short of well-bred. When it comes to amenities I’m middlin’ to muddlin’.

And that puts me at a significant disadvantage when it comes to the world’s second oldest sport, that fierce contest of social sorting. Among my greatest fears is to walk into a room of people I only faintly know, if at all,

with little hope of finding my place in the mix; and if the seating is not assigned, I'm praying for one of those invisibility cloaks from *Harry Potter*. Just let me disappear. Jesus if you're coming, now would be a pretty good time. And there's a good chance that the bad dream will turn into a nightmare when I approach a table that looks to have an empty seat, only to hear those demoralizing words, *I'm sorry, that seat is taken*.

To be honest, if I had received an invitation to that wedding feast Jesus was talking about, I might have rsvp'd that I had a prior commitment, maybe to visit a bookstore or clean out my email box. I envy those who breeze into the crowd, self-assured and knowing they belong. They're not exhausted by the test of social sorting. Rather, they are driven by the thought of it and energized by the act of it. Jesus, on the other hand, was unimpressed by it and immune to it, suggesting an alternative approach to mealtime mores.

“On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.” Well, doesn't that just warm your heart and make for a lovely evening, knowing your every move is being examined under a microscope by those

who were already suspicious of you even before extending the invitation. Perhaps the reason for their invitation was for their entertainment, the chance to observe your discomfort and humiliation.

“They were watching him closely.” Will you say the wrong thing? Make the wrong move? Appear too confident or remain too detached? To know you are being scrutinized and tested, though their verdict was rendered even before you were introduced. You don’t feel like a guest. You feel like an item on the meal’s menu.

Yet, it turns out, Jesus was watching the watchers in addition to observing the gathering guests. Now, that is a great spectator sport, a sport of which I’d much rather be a spectator than a participant. Imagine a banquet hall filled with round tables of eight. There’s no map or chart of seating assignments at the entrance; no name tags with the place-settings on the tables. You’re on your own, so if you can’t attach yourself to someone before the end of the cocktail hour you may be left standing as alone as the loser in a game of musical chairs.

From the vantage point of the spectator, though, it is as if you’re gazing out upon the retail floor at Belk’s as seasoned shoppers hunt their

prey. He finds a shirt he likes, one that flatters him, but out of the corner of his eye, he spies another shirt that could possibly flatter him a little bit more, and so he drifts in that direction, only to be distracted by the cut of the shirt worn by the salesperson that he hasn't seen displayed on the floor. Can he get the inside track on that shirt, the shirt that will certainly get him noticed? Only, back at the banquet hall, the gathered guests aren't shopping for shirts, they are shopping for people. The game is on. To whom can you attach yourself in a way that will make you look good, improve your status, pad your resume, advance your agenda. You are sorting through the crowd, an expert at tradecraft, bantering and small-talking your way up the social ladder, waiting to pull out the velcro until you reach the top, or at least as high as you're going to get this time.

Isn't it astounding? There is a constant din of voices, but no actual conversation. There are times I think Yogi Berra was spot on: "It was impossible to get a conversation going, everybody was talking too much." It all stays superficial out of fear of being stuck when someone more impressive comes along. One can maintain a lively social life without forming any friendships. If you're always reaching for the next rung on the social ladder, are you ever able to be present to the people you are with?

Here's a thought, an idea, an experiment, if you will. The next social occasion you attend, when that first introduction is made, or that first dose of small talk is commenced, or that first acquaintance is encountered, make this silent commitment in your mind: I choose you, and I will be fully present to you as long as it lasts, at least until you are pulled away or excuse yourself. I will not seek out someone more connected, respected, networked, or net-worthed. I choose you , and on this night, for this time, the only item on my agenda is a request - Tell me more, about your journey, your past, your present, your hopes and fears.

Granted, there is a risk with this experiment because you will occasionally come across the arrogant, self-involved chowderhead from whom you'd rather hear a lot less. Yet, the risk is worth it because any encounter transformed into conversation can so often be an occasion of grace. Longfellow said, "A single conversation across the table with a wise man is better than ten years mere study of books."

And as Longfellow suggested, the table is so often essential to meaningful conversation. Luke knew this because Jesus revealed this. The sharing of food as we're gathered at the table. Eating and table fellowship

are significant in Luke. One could almost say that Jesus walked so much during his public ministry because he ate so much along the way. He needed to stay in good enough shape to make it to Jerusalem. Early on, we see that Simon's mom was healed in time to cook dinner. There's a banquet at Levi's house, where Jesus is chastised for the amount of time he spends eating and drinking with sinners. After this, Jesus is skipping a fast and demonstrating his expertise as a sommelier. Jesus was eating with the Pharisees, when memorably interrupted by the woman with the alabaster jar, who had come to anoint him. Elsewhere, Jesus is again accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners, and yet, Jesus welcomes invitations to dine with Pharisees, invites himself to eat with Zacchaeus, feeds five thousand, eats with Mary and Martha, highlights the banquet for the prodigal, and gathers with his disciples in an upper room. "Take eat, do this in remembrance of me."

Fellowship around a meal is so integral to a meaningful life that Jesus deigned it as the human event that most closely resembles the kingdom of God. And what Jesus intimates in today's parable is that coming to the table with an agenda spoils the meal. When the guest or the host approaches it as a means to self-advancement or self-enrichment, the Spirit of God takes an

early exit. Meaning is polluted by manipulation. Hope is shattered by hierarchy. Peace is thwarted by opportunism.

The table is another place where far too often, Jesus' words ring true: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" However, when we lose the agenda, we may well gain a friend. Columnist David Brooks once suggested that "The daily activity that contributes most to happiness is having dinner with friends. The daily activity that detracts most from happiness is commuting. Eat more. Commute less."

There is wisdom in that, but isn't it also true that while the agenda-free table becomes the place of our greatest memories when surrounded by friends and family, it is also the place where most of our meaningful relationships begin: mother with child in the middle of the night; family at the kitchen table; those first few ventures into the college cafeteria; the first date dinner; the church potluck; the neighborhood picnic; the mission team, exhausted after the labor in the sun, yet pushing tables together at the diner because eating apart would be to sacrifice the best part of the day. You're

too tired to posture and preen, so there's plenty of space for joy and laughter, and grace.

The labor activist Cesar Chavez once said, "If you really want to make a friend, go to someone's house and eat with him... the people who give you their food give you their heart." Perhaps our hospitality committee could make a sign for our shared meals here at the church.

Shall we gather at the table?

Lose the agenda. Leave as friends.

For such is the kingdom of God.

Amen.