

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 9/02/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Someone has said that Jesus was always on his way to a banquet, at a banquet, leaving a banquet, or talking about a banquet. We find him at a banquet, yet again, in today's Gospel passage.

The banquets of Jesus' day were complex affairs. There were layers of rules and expectations about who would be invited and why, and who would sit where, and why. This social framework was a means by which importance was designated and communicated, and honor was bestowed.

It's not unlike dinner parties in some social and business circles in our culture. I remember an event I attended when Larry worked for a Wall Street firm. We were small fish in a big pond in New York's central office. But when we did a six-year stint in Japan in the 1980s, the staffing of the Tokyo office meant that we moved up a bit in the corporate hierarchy – if only in that particular location. In those days, most of the bankers were men, and when a top executive from New York or elsewhere visited Japan, it wasn't unusual for the general manager of the Tokyo office to host an event for the executive, while the wife of the general manager entertained the spouse.

There was so much drama associated with the dinner to which I was invited. For weeks before the event, there was a constant buzz at the Tokyo American Club and at the western-style supermarket among the ex-pats associated with the company. Which of the wives had been invited and which hadn't been? Who might be seated near the visiting celebrity spouse and the General Manager's wife, and who wouldn't be near enough to either of them even to be noticed?

So much planning and emotional energy was invested in ranking importance and bestowing honor in this tiny slice of corporate life. And even so, the guest of honor ended up experiencing a most embarrassing moment. Somehow, she hadn't been told that this dinner would take place at a traditional Japanese restaurant, at which guests would sit on pillows on the floor in front of very low tables. The visiting executive's wife wore a very trendy designer skirt that was about this wide [gesture of hands indicating about a foot across] and about this long [gesture of hands indicating about a foot long]. It was utterly impossible for her to wriggle herself into her seat without exposing herself to the rest of us. And since etiquette demanded that no one else sit down until she was seated, everyone stood watching the whole awkward ordeal.

She finally slithered to the floor, supported on each side by other guests while she clutched her skirt. By then, the level of tension and anxiety had ratcheted up even higher, and the talk for days afterwards was about how what had happened might reflect on the hostess and her husband, and what the fallout might be.

Over and over again, Jesus used banquet imagery to convey God's intention for human society. According to Jesus, God's rules of table etiquette don't resemble ours. The guests at God's table include those whom most of us wouldn't think of inviting, like prisoners and complete strangers. No one is ranked higher or lower in importance. No one sits at a head table, because all are equally loved and valued by God. Those hosting the banquet do so without any expectation of being repaid; it's done purely for the privilege and the joy of sharing what they have with those who don't have enough. The celebration of the Eucharist – the center of our corporate worship – is our opportunity to personally experience God's table etiquette. We gather at this table where Christ is our host; where all are welcomed and included; and where the love and the grace of God are poured out upon all, generously and unconditionally.

I'd like to tell you about another banquet. In the summer of 2002, our son, Keene, worked for a non-profit organization in Chicago that gave inner-city teenagers exposure to the business world. Each of these young people was paired with a company with whom they would have an ongoing relationship throughout their four years of high school. Every summer, the kids served as interns at their companies from Monday through Thursday. On Friday, they met together for a practicum on the nuts and bolts of functioning independently in the world, learning life skills like opening a bank account and balancing a checkbook.

One of the supporters of this non-profit organization recognized that a lot of business and networking takes place in the context of meals, and that most of these teenagers came from backgrounds that would have provided little, if any, exposure to the social skills required for fine dining. An arrangement was made between the donor and the Peninsula Hotel, one of the newest and most luxurious hotels in Chicago. A banquet was prepared for these young people, during which they would be gently guided in proper table etiquette.

What a contrast between the banquet in Chicago and the one I had attended in Tokyo! The dinner prepared for the teenagers had no guest of honor and no jockeying for positions of importance. It wasn't about impressing anyone. The hosts threw open the doors of the hotel's magnificent banquet room to kids raised in poverty so at least some other doors wouldn't be closed to them down the road simply because of their lack of experience with table etiquette.

The kids received this generous gift with pure joy. Keene remembers that there was some initial nervousness as they gazed upon the china, the crystal, and the silver gleaming beneath the light of the sparkling chandeliers. But an atmosphere of celebration soon took over. As course after course of exquisitely prepared food was served, the young guests became more and more excited. The air rang with their laughter as they inadvertently slurped their soup or used the wrong fork and were kindly corrected by the instructor or each other. They were eager to learn, quick to encourage each other, and utterly delighted with the whole experience.

Each child felt like a valued, honored guest. The hosts provided generously, with no expectation of repayment, but with the joy of knowing that they had invested in the lives of disadvantaged young people who are so often overlooked.

We're invited to a place at the table of the risen Christ, where we're welcomed unconditionally and fed lavishly. We've been blessed with an abundance of gifts and resources. What might our response be as we leave this table? At coffee hour, will we gather only with our friends, or might we reach out to the newcomer or the stranger in our midst, or the person with whom it's most difficult for us to relate? What opportunities might be before us in the coming week to host a banquet, broadly defined?

May we learn and practice Jesus' table etiquette so that our relationships are transformed in and through love. May we continually live by God's kingdom manners. Amen.