

Table Talk
Based on Luke 14:1-14
Aspen Community UMC
September 2, 2007

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The United States government has a division within the State Department called the Office of the Chief of Protocol.

I learned about this when after college I lived in Washington D.C. and worked on the White House staff – this was a long time ago.

I have a few stories from that time, and I will share them from time to time,

but when I read the scripture for today, I thought of something I used to see back then called the *Order of Precedence of the United States*.

We commonly called it the green book, I think.

I remember going to the green book several times to determine how someone should be addressed at official functions, or how an invitation should be addressed.

In this book I could learn about seating at state dinners, how one was to introduce one individual to another, even dietary customs and restrictions.

It was an interesting book.

What I learned is that social transactions on the state level are so clearly set forth, that they almost preclude or inhibit, authentic personal conversation and sharing. On the other hand, what they do is create a context for initial and formal introductions.

They actually lay a foundation for respect and dialogue. And this is not what was going on in the gospel story.

What I am remembering in protocol for state events is more like the structure I mentioned last week - the structure that allows for the creative energies – the love of the creator - of the universe – to do its work.

The structure created by official state protocol creates a space for introductions that hopefully prevent

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the kind of faux pas that might end up having troublesome consequences
for international relations, and create bad feelings
and misunderstandings because of cultural differences.

What was happening in our reading today at the table
created lots of bad feelings.

Let's think about another table.

The table of our Lord

is a place that creates a context for you and me – and for all who come to the table
to come into closer relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

It creates a context for us to explore
forgiveness and reconciliation with whomever we have been at odds with.

It creates a context for us to want to learn what we may look like from the God's eye view.

It creates a context for us to want to study,
to be able to share ourselves with others in a really genuine way,
and to ask for guidance about what the God's eye view may be like.

There is something of this in what Jesus was teaching those
in attendance at the formal dinner in our lesson today.

It appears to be a kind of political-religious event -
perhaps a dinner to celebrate a special guest.

People are watching one another – and Jesus to see if he
would breach any proscribed conduct.

Perhaps the Chief of Protocol was there.

The principles that come from his teaching at this time and place
are about how we relate to one another
socially, and more than that, socially and faithfully -
and how it may look from the God's eye view.

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The man with dropsy who presents himself may have been a set-up to see if Jesus would again – heal on the Sabbath. And, of course, he does.

Jesus then changes the subject and gives us some spiritual principles - about how we can exclude ourselves by excluding others

But not only that – how we may actually exclude the divine and not even know it.

I think about it as the divine hiding out in places and persons we would not expect.

kind of like a story I know about The Rabbi's Gift.

It goes like this:

There was once a famous monastery that had fallen on hard times.

Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks,

and its big church resounded with the singing of the chant,

but now it was nearly deserted.

People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer.

A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters

and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut.

He would come there from time to time to fast and pray.

No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared,

the word would be passed from monk to monk:

“The rabbi walks in the woods.” And, for as long as he was there,

the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him.

So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods.

As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway,

his arms outstretched in welcome.

It was as though he had been waiting there for some time.

The two embraced like long-lost brothers.

Then they stepped back and just stood there,

smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

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After a while, the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter.

In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the scriptures open on it.
They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the book. Then the rabbi began to cry.

The abbot covered his face with his hands and began to cry, too.

For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out.

The two men sat there like little children,
filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears.
After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head.

“You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,” he said.

“You have come to ask a teaching of me.

I will give you this teaching, but you can only repeat it once.

After that, no one must say it aloud again.”

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said,

“The messiah is among you.”

For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, “Now you must go.”

The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room.
He told them he had received a teaching from “the rabbi who walks in the woods”
and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud.

Then he looked at each of his brothers and said,

“The rabbi said that one of us is the messiah!”

The monks were startled. “What could it mean?” they asked themselves.

“Is Brother John the messiah? Or Father Matthew? Or Brother Thomas?

Or the hungry man outside our gate?

Am I the messiah? What could this mean?”

They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi’s teaching, but no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence.

There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now,
which was hard to describe but easy to notice.

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They lived with one another as men who had finally found something.

but they prayed the scriptures together as men
who were always looking for something.

Occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks.

Before long, people were coming from far and wide
to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks,
and young men were asking, once again,
to become part of the community.

In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods.

His hut had fallen into ruins.

But somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still
felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

I invite us today to share our lives together as though we have found something -
and listen to scripture, pray together, and share table talk
as people who are always looking for something.

Let's explore how the spirit is here -

in this place, in this community, in this valley.

Let's explore how the spirit is alive in the places we go
and the people we meet.

We can actually go hungry, when we get too involved in
trying to determine with whom we want to share our table,
and who will invite us in return.

Sharing a meal is a sacred thing – and so is sharing table talk.

There is a divine hospitality
like the table of our Lord, or in the Kiddush I shared with the Jewish congregation.

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And the divine invitation is from one
who knows all people in all walks of life are alike in those divine eyes.

There is a divine hospitality that invites *table talk*
that includes more persons than we usually think to include.
For we never know when someone looks at us through divine eyes -
like when the old rabbi told the abbot – “the Messiah is among you.”
May we be more aware and open to those divine eyes
and the divine table.