

6 Pentecost 29
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One of the things I've always loved about this island is that people like to eat! And by eating I don't mean the food (only!) but the ritual of eating – here it's an art form, in my experience – don't expect to “eat and run” – a meal takes the whole evening.

Meals are, for us, opportunities for getting to know one another, for the discovery of differences and of similarities, for fellowship.

Meals cross all barriers: social, cultural, economic, ethnic. I've found – and I'm guessing that you have too – that some of the most interesting and rewarding meals have been those with people who are quite different than me.

When we come here each Sunday we share in a meal that – along with it's theological and liturgical components – has much in common with the meals I just described. Eucharist is about the many becoming one, about the diversity of humanity becoming one people under God, about sharing with one another and rejoicing in difference that – as St. Paul says – no longer matters: “for this no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female....” and we can add to that list.

Jesus' table fellowship is the foundation of this pattern of eating. You'll recall from any number of Gospel stories how he ate with pretty much anyone at the drop of a hat...he didn't care if they were peasants, day laborers, Pharisees, rich, poor, outcasts or insiders.

Of course, some of the folk who we hear about in the gospels didn't always approve! Somehow they seem out of place to us in the generous world of Jesus.

What's striking for me about Jesus' table fellowship is something not at all apparent to us today. It's not apparent to us because we follow social norms that allow for the sort of casual social arrangements I described here on the island that reflect much of our cultural expectations about how our world works.

In the Mediterranean world of the First Century you just didn't eat with anyone. Because who you ate with said something about you, not about them. For instance, If you were a high-born Roman you simply wouldn't eat with someone not of your social rank – there are records of meals where guests were seated in different rooms depending on their social status. In fact there are records of guests in the same room being served different foods depending on their social status.

In part this was because of the common Mediterranean attitude toward outsiders – and by outsiders I don't mean “foreigners”, but people not from your clan, or your village, or your neighborhood. The “in-group” was generally your family, your immediate neighbors, and your friends, and that was it. Within the in-group there was trust, loyalty, consideration, courtesy. In-group were closer than the way we view families today – to be inside the boundary was everything – to be outside was to be dead.

You see the struggle between insider and outsider throughout the gospels – Jesus' demand for loyalty, his treating the disciples as a special group – these things reflect some of that culture.

The social arrangements around meals, the struggle between in-group and out-group.....all of this makes Jesus' approach to meals even more remarkable. Anyone is welcome at the divine table, no matter their social status, or whether they're part of the in-group or not..

It may surprise you to know that this background is essential for understanding today's gospel!! What Jesus describes is all the more striking given the way he consistently violated social boundaries, flaunted his willingness to dismiss cherished social norms, and generally proclaimed that the world was about to be turned upside down by God.

Today's gospel is Jesus saying, in the context I've just described, something like this: “I don't believe in making social distinctions between people. Everyone is a child of God. Everyone is welcome at God's table – your social background, whether you come from a familiar in-group or not, none of these things matter.”

“But”, says Jesus, “I do draw the line somewhere. There is a category you can belong to – a category that you have to choose to belong to – that dismantles all of my attempts to draw you into the diverse community of God’s Empire.”

“You place yourself on the wrong side of God, on the wrong side of history, on the wrong side of humanity, when you tread any person as less than a person, as less than a human being; when your focus on yourself and refuse to offer even the barest minimum of human empathy and support for the poor, the sick, the needy, the lost.”

And this is not only about how we act toward others. This passage describes a “human hospitality” that is required of all of us for us to be human. If we fail to act in ways that create community, that build up the lowly, that feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, we are somehow less human ourselves.

Human life is a symbiotic relationship...we need each other to be fully human for each of us to be fully human too. Entering into that fully human identity is what Jesus proclaims to us as Good News: the end of division, of separation from God and each other; the restoration of human dignity and identity. This is what being saved is all about.

This is, ultimately, what lies at the very core of Jesus’ message to us – and so it’s fitting that we should hear it as we both celebrate Jesus as our King, as our Emperor, as our President, and as we celebrate the ending of this Christian cycle. Next week, as I’ve mentioned that cycle begins again with preparations for the first of the Great Christian festivals, the coming of Jesus among us.

Today’s gospel passage is an exclamation point on the Story of Jesus and Us and God. May it also be for all of us a doorway into that fuller discipleship that each of us is being called to by God. And the people said Amen.