



Meals with Jesus: 3 **Luke 14:1-24 and Luke 24: 28-32**

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A year and a day ago, on Thanksgiving morning in 2022, I was on a Zoom with people in Scotland, interviewing for my “dream job,” following a calling that I had felt acutely for at least six months, and maybe for as long as seventeen years. I had closed on the sale of my house on Monday, drove from Tennessee to my parents’ house in Georgia on Tuesday, and checked into a hotel on Wednesday, so that I could be ready and undistracted for the interview on Thursday.

I interviewed on the morning of Thanksgiving because they don’t really have Thanksgiving in the UK, so to them it was just a Thursday. Of course to us it was not, but I did everything I could to have the best interview possible. It went super well, everyone was pleased, I knocked it out of the park, I went back to my parent’s house, and we all gave thanks. And then the next day, one year ago today, I found out that I didn’t get the job.

And every single one of the 365 days since then has been a total surprise. I have been as depressed as I have ever been, and I have been happier than I can remember. And I can honestly say that every single person in this room, and everyone worshipping online, has been particularly instrumental in the second part, in the happiness part, and no matter what happens next I will always be so grateful for these all too short four months in the Finger Lakes.

And so the question becomes, what do I do with this gratitude I feel? To what end is its purpose? When we are given a gift, a blessing, something for which we offer genuine thanksgiving, where then do we go with it so that we may be a blessing to others? In my case, the question I am asking, and that frankly I do not have an answer for, at least now yet, is do I root down build with it, or do throw it up into the wind and let it carry on with me to the next adventure?

Now this may just be where I am personally in life. You know, I'm not that big into psychology broadly, I go to therapy and everything but I can't really tell you what approach we use or anything. But I've always appreciated Erikson's stages of life development, which says that each stage of life pits two conflicting forces against each other. To me, it's very much like a boxing match with one existential question in one corner and its inverse in the other. So as an infant, your psychosocial crisis is Trust and Mistrust, and you're constantly asking, "Can I trust the world?" As you get older, in adolescence, your conflicting forces are Identity and Role Confusion, and your existential question is, "Who am I?" As someone who is 43, I have just recently moved from the early adulthood phase of Intimacy or Isolation where I asked myself, "Can I unite myself with another person?" CHECK, and now I am moving firmly into middle age which puts against each other: Generativity or Stagnation, or existential question of "Can I make my life count?" Apparently the only other thing after that is late adulthood which has Integrity in one corner and Despair in the other. So something to look forward to?

I mean, it may be a little bleak but it does give me a framework for trying to work out why it's difficult to know what to do next, how to take these 365 days of God's weird surprises and know what to do with them all. Cuz one thing I've learned is that I feel God's calling very strongly, but I'm not always right. So that's weird.

But honestly I don't think that these conflicting forces are something specific to me, just because Erikson said I must be "middle age." In fact, I think this this question of generativity or stagnation is helpful for the church, but honestly I think it's poorly phrased, or maybe I don't fully understand Erikson, even after Googling him for a total of five minutes. But to me, stagnation is too negative a word. For me, and more importantly I think for the church, the dichotomies in each corner are more like tradition and innovation, excellence and experience, comfort and care.

And as I leave you all at this stage in the journey, and offer to you what parting words of wisdom I may scrounge up, I think these dichotomies are at work here, in this church, as you all discern your path forward as well.

Because I have always thought - and this time, I don't have anyone to Google although I'm sure I didn't come up with this idea, but I don't know who else did so someone let me know if I should be quoting someone - but I have always understood there to be basically two kinds of people who come to church.

So broadly, on one side, you have people who come to church because of tradition, history, family, and consistency. And often, not all the time, but lots of the time, these

people find sanctuary in a congregation because of the consistency. They enjoy that things don't change much around here. Maybe that's because there's a lot of chaos in their life, or change in society, but they want to be a part of a place that feels like home, that feels familiar, even and especially when everything else is changing.

But then there's the other group of people, and they come to a church because they are looking for an experience of God. They want to be knocked senseless by this new thing that God is doing, they want to think broadly about what the ministry of the church could be, and they might even be willing to tear the whole thing down if that's what it took to live out the Word of God.

And frankly it's far too easy to delineate these two groups into liberal or conservative, old or young, or the traditional worship people and the contemporary worship people. I think there are young liberals who love to sing "Lift High the Cross," and there are older conservatives who are frustrated by the lack of energy in the church, and all kinds of other mishmashes of people who end up here. And I certainly think some of us embody both.

When I first moved to Memphis, I would attend Idlewild Presbyterian Church with its elevated pulpit and fabulous organ, and where lots of people still dressed up for church, very reminiscent of the church that was so fundamental in my childhood and adolescence. But then sometimes I would attend First Congregational Church, with its come-one-come-all Gospel choir, and its *avant garde* worship, and where prostitutes – not metaphorical ones, but literal working prostitutes – would clap and dance and make a joyful noise during the closing hymn. And I found that I really needed both, I would attend both, sometimes going to one more than the other, sometimes splitting down the middle. I found that I *need* to sing the Hallelujah Chorus in four parts on Easter, preferably with brass, and I *need* to be in a church where a PhD professor and prostitute wearing bunny ears can dance together in celebration of the Risen Lord and no one bats an eye. I need them both, and God works in and through both, but it is almost impossible to envision how they can realistically thrive together.

How do you explain to someone who has never heard the song, what it means to you to hear the chorus to *How Great Thou Art*? To remember the choir from your childhood, with dozens of voices singing it, and to hear the same chords that you heard when you were eight and eighty? To think back to that moment when you sang it at your wedding, and at your spouse's funeral? How do you tell someone who has no connection with the hymn why it's important for us to sing it?

But then also, how do you explain to someone that the things they love about their church are the things that traumatized you? To remember the experience of attending worship only to hear a preacher speak words of hatred, or scare you with threats of hell and damnation? To think back to the moment when you decided that it was healthier, better, far more Christian for you to go to brunch on Sunday with your chosen family than it was to step one more foot into a so-called “house of worship?”

We are all broken, battered, and grieving, but also hoping, seeking and saving each other. But where in the world do we come together? How do we honor and critique our traditions, or stretch ourselves to unite with a community when we have been so burned by them? How can we preserve the beauty of our faith while also gathering in people who are desperately seeking beauty but do not understand it in the way we so want to share it? When and where does that happen?

Honestly, I can't think of any place where that has the chance to happen other than the table. The act and experience of sitting down together, sharing bread or whatever is a proxy for it, welcoming others, learning about their preferences, their allergies, their history, and then creating and hosting a meal where the first question isn't, “What do you believe?” but instead is, “Hey, are you hungry?”

Now, I don't want to over-romanticize the act of sharing a meal. Some of us just had a big meal with friends and family, and frankly it didn't go to well. Maybe there wasn't a lot of coming around the table, being grateful, horns of plenty and whatnot. Maybe it was a bit of the opposite. I saw a video online where this family had, instead of the kids table and the adults table, they had a special table for the Democrats. Rough going, over there. And maybe you're uncomfortable with the idea of meals in general. Maybe you're dealing with an eating disorder, or maybe you just don't enjoy a lot of food, you'd rather, I don't know, pop a pellet like in the Jetson's and do something more interesting.

And yet, we have to eat. In a joke that will only be funny to my best friend Mary and anyone with an above average knowledge of the album catalogue of Outkast, the famed rap group from the Dirty South, one thing is for certain: “Baby gotta eat.” We have a biological need to consume and produce energy, and we have a universal tradition of doing that in groups, and so despite the intricacies of the table, who gets to sit where and who eats what, the table becomes one of the few places where we can all gather, and understand what is going on, and have our needs met, and help serve others.

And again, this all may sound melodramatic, you know like I am trying to draw deep theological meaning from the drive thru breakfast I had this morning. But meals, food,

eating, I think they are, or can be, dramatic. I have never known hunger. There has never been one day when I have had to worry that I wouldn't have something to eat. And when I think about people in Gaza and Ukraine, people who through technology and globalism just seem so much closer to us, how they have been forced to find tables and break mediocre excuses for actual bread, and we read or hear about their daily struggles for basic sustenance, it just breaks your hearts and we ask, are we really doing all this to each other over God? In a "Holy Land?" I listened to a podcast about Israelis and Gazans who have left their homes since the crisis began, and the guilt they feel for having the basic things like food to eat. The relief of being able to sit at table and enjoy food in safety, versus the gnawing truth that your family is desperately trying to gather together and break any form of bread, is unimaginable and heart-breaking. And yet I'm sure there are people in these violent places, and people in our own backyard, who against all odds are sitting down right now together to share a bit of a meal. And like in any meal there is some laughter, there's some tension, there's some thanksgiving. And there is the presence of Christ.

Because Luke tells us that the Son of Man came eating and drinking. I think Jesus joined in so many meals and did so much teaching around the table because it's incredibly practical and applicable on a daily basis. Pastor Amy Starr Redwine says, "Tables aren't just the place where we gather with the people we love and give thanks to God – which we often call saying "grace." Tables are where we get to practice receiving and giving God's grace. God has invited us to be a part of an incredible banquet – a metaphor for God's community – the place where all of God's people come together."¹

And that's what we see in these two stories of meals from the Gospel of Luke. In the first one we heard, there's a lot going on, but basically Jesus goes to the home of a prominent cleric on the Sabbath for a meal and three things happen: he heals a man, then he tells a parable about the importance of humility, and then another one about inviting a lot of social outcasts to a dinner party. The point is that this chapter steadily escalates the population, size and scope of those who should be invited to the table of God but are, for whatever reason, are not.

Three examples of welcoming others to the table – the sick, the lowly, the outcasts. Three escalating explanations of who should be invited and given a place of privilege – the individual who is suffering, the people who are invited but are slightly less important than you, and then the people who are never invited and cannot even believe they're receiving an invitation. While Jesus has already been eating at the tables of tax collectors and with prostitutes – two groups not known as popular dining guests in

¹ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Amy-Starr-Redwine-the-Urgency-of-Now.pdf>

Jesus's time or, frankly, in ours – now Jesus is stepping it up a notch and proclaiming not only should you eat with people you don't like or find shameful, you should intentionally welcome those people to the table, go out of your way to make sure they're invited, they come, they sit, they dine, they enjoy themselves. That's what having a meal with Christ is all about.

And in the second story that I read, we learn what happens when you do sit down at the table with a stranger. Not only might you be sharing a meal with Christ unawares, but we see again this act, of breaking bread with others at table, is the way that Jesus demonstrates who he is and that he lives again. I mean, think about it: Jesus could have done any number of things to tell these disciples that he was their friend. He could have, I don't know, raised someone from the dead, healed someone, quoted some teaching he had shared with them. There's a million things he could do.

If you had to prove to someone else that you are who you say you are, what would you do to jog their memory and get them to believe? Like, if I spontaneously had a new face, but I was the same person inside, how would I prove it to all of you that it's me? In my case it would probably involve some profanity and saying the word "y'all" a lot, or perhaps the real way to prove that I'm me would be something like, busting out into my rendition of *Midnight Train to Georgia*. That's maybe one of the fool proof ways of proving that yes, I'm Stacy and I'm still me.

And the way that Jesus does that, the method that Jesus employs to prove that he is the Messiah, risen again, the thing that is more quintessentially him, is this: "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." If you're seeking Jesus, or at a more base level, if you're seeking joy, connection, community, faith, this is where you find it. As we say each time we take communion, "it is Christ's will that those who seek him should come and find him here."

And I believe that, Westminster, is the challenge that is set before you. In the midst of our divisions and declining, of setting up a separate table for the Democrats or the unhoused or the non-verbal or people who didn't grow up singing from the old red hymnal, I believe you are called to a ministry of welcome, of nourishment, of feeding, perhaps both metaphorically and literally. Now I don't know what that looks like. It might look like a giant table down Genesee Street or a new invitation to worship or a repurposing of the building or a meeting up with people who generally eat at different times or different tables. I don't know what all y'all are hungry for. And it's not going to be easy, that's why Jesus kept going to meal after meal, because he was trying to

show us how to do this hard work. But I do know that this is a place of sustenance and welcome and nourishment and gratitude. And those flavors are always in season.

Whether you're here for the first time, the last time, or somewhere in the middle, I want you to know that this is Westminster Presbyterian Church, where you're already home. You're home.

And now that we've arrived at home, what do you need? We need a snack. All of us are hungry, and we need to be fed. And you are wrapped in the love of Jesus Christ, *God* who came among us eating and drinking. And it is this body of Christ that can understand those pangs of deep hunger that we all feel, and also provide the life-giving meals that we need to be healthy and whole. We are all hungry for the Spirit of the Living God, and this community of faith shall set a beautiful table of welcome for all those whom Jesus invites. For, all.

But, as you know, I don't do the cooking. So for now, I gotta go, and I offer you all my thanksgiving and all of my gratitude. To all of you, thank you.

May it be so, this day and always. Amen.