

“The Kingdom Is a Lunch Table” Luke 14:1, 7-14

Do remember your lunch table when you were in high school? I don’t mean the stuff on your tray--a cheeseburger, pizza, green beans, or a carton of chocolate milk. I’m not talking about *what* you ate, but *where* you ate.

For me, that is not very hard at all. After about the first week of my freshman year at Mitchell High School, I brought my lunch from home. And I ate almost every single day in the instrument room with a few other members of the marching band.

Those of us in the band tended to stick together at lunch. And as I recall, so did several other little cliques at the school. The football players and cheerleaders mostly ate with other football players and cheerleaders. The kids who took the AP classes liked to hang out with other kids in the AP classes. And the rough kids, the kids who had a reputation for getting in trouble for cutting class and smoking, also seemed to congregate together.

About 25 or 30 years later, whenever I would pick up our daughter or one of our sons at high school at lunchtime, someone in the school office always knew just where to find them in a school of 1,500-2,500 kids because they usually ate in the same location with the same friends almost every day.

And an online article from this past April¹ spoke with five current high school students and indicated that some things have not changed.

“There are definitely divides between the groups,” said a girl identified as Erica. “There is a risen stage with four tables in my lunch room that is reserved for the cool seniors. Even though it’s an unwritten rule, no younger students dare to sit on the stage.”

She also said, “I do drama at school and am close with all of the drama kids, but I sit with the ‘popular table’ at lunch instead of with the drama kids ... A lot of the popular kids make fun of the drama kids and I am constantly reminding them that I am friends with those guys. People definitely refer to the different groups as the ‘band kids’ and ‘drama kids’.”

A girl called Mary identified some of the cliques at her school as *“soccer boys, the thespians, partiers, hippies, anime lovers, (and) artsy people.”*

And a girl called Laura said, *“In the cafeteria, everyone does have their own set table.”*

¹ <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/04/230395/mean-girls-cafeteria-map-cliques-racist-stereotypes>

There was a well-known proverb in the ancient world in which Jesus lived. *“I saw them eating,”* it said, *“and I knew who they were.”*² So it was in Jesus’ time. And so it is, I guess, in high school cafeterias even today.

But don’t think for a minute that such behavior is limited to teenagers and first-century Israelites. Many of us, maybe even most of us, act as if the world is one big lunch table. Where we sit tells us who we are. And so, we chase after certain seats so that we can climb the ladder of success.

Once upon a time, people joined certain religious groups or certain churches because they offered a better seat at the table. You may have heard the old joke about what you call the Methodist who became a millionaire? A Presbyterian. And what is the first thing that Presbyterian does after becoming a billionaire? Join the Episcopal Church, of course.

And this is why folks pay such outrageous sums of money to attend lunches and dinners with politicians and other leaders. It’s not because of the meals that are served. It’s because hanging around with important people can make us feel like important people.

It’s why people are willing to wait for a year to get a seat at some fine dining restaurants around the world. It’s not so much for the food on the menu as for the prestige of sitting at such an exclusive table.

You have probably heard the news stories about the 33 wealthy parents who decided to pay more than \$25 million to bribe college officials and cheat on entrance exams to get their children into certain schools and universities.³ It’s not because they were concerned about their child’s education. It’s because they wanted to make sure that their kids had the best seats at the table.

Jesus watches as people like you and me scramble for position. Everyone wants to get as close to the host as possible. Everyone wants the best seats.

It even happens in the church. We focus our attention on our standing before God so that we can assure ourselves of a good place in the kingdom. The most important thing in our lives becomes how close we are to God. We strive and strive and strive some more to climb Jacob’s ladder all the way into heaven.

² *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Fred Craddock.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_college_admissions_bribery_scandal

And we forget one very important thing about God's kingdom.⁴ This came to me as I read a story about another lunch table at a high school in Houston, Texas. A group of ten girls sit together almost every day during lunch at that school.

These ten girls were originally from nine different countries. They are from Cuba and Mexico. They are from places in Africa like Angola, Congo, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. They are from nations in Asia like Myanmar, Thailand, and Nepal.

They drink chocolate milk and eat hamburgers, pizza, and carrot sticks. They complain about their homework assignments and try to help each other study for upcoming quizzes. They share secrets. They send text messages. And they post pictures on social media.

They laugh together and celebrate together. And yes, sometimes, they even cry together. Every day, there is a seat saved for each one of these girls. So there is no need to scramble and fight for a spot.

How did those girls get together? How did they get seats at this lunch table? They were *invited* to sit there.

They don't agree about exactly who first invited whom. Seventeen year-old Lluvia explains that she and another girl named Rosangela asked Marinela to sit with them one day. Another girl named Linda points to Tomi who invited her.

Tomi points to Duretti who invited her. Duretti points to Mary who invited her. And Mary points to two sisters named Amrita and Sristi who invited her.

No one can force their way into a seat at a lunch table like that or at any high school lunch table for that matter. No one captures a seat by getting there before anyone else. And Jesus says that this is also the way that it is in the kingdom of God.

Seats at the table in the kingdom of God are awarded by invitation only. In these eight verses from Luke, Jesus uses the word *invite* seven times. He keeps reminding us that we are invited to this table. We are invited into the kingdom.

The Host determines who sits where. And the Host is, of course, God. There is nothing that we can do to grab spot closer to the Host. But the amazingly wonderful good news is that the Host has a seat saved for us and calls us to sit there, saying "*Welcome, friend!*"

⁴ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-11-03/one-lunch-table-10-girls-nine-countries-meet-everyday-and-share-countless-stories>

Move on up here!” There is no ladder to climb into heaven. There is only God’s gracious invitation.

If we look at the world as one big lunch table, we get caught up in what other people and other activities can do for us. How does sitting here with this person make me look? Will this help me climb the ladder? Will this improve my standing in God’s eyes? Can this person help me get a better seat in the kingdom?

And according to Jesus, these are the wrong questions. The point of the kingdom is not lifting up ourselves. It is about lifting others up. It is not about getting ourselves good seats closer to the Host. It is about offering a seat to someone who needs a place to sit.

Jesus says that the kingdom is not about focusing on how close we are to God. The kingdom is about focusing on the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. It is not about seeking to improve our standing in God’s eyes. It is about seeking to improve the conditions, the situations, and the very lives of others. It is not about climbing to a higher place. It is about standing and sitting with those who are in low places.

A young man named Denis Estimon gets what the kingdom is all about. His family immigrated to Florida from Haiti when he was in the first grade. And he remembers feeling alone and isolated when he first arrived, especially at lunch.

As he grew up, he eventually made plenty of friends, but he never forgot how it felt to sit by himself at the lunch table. So, with some friends at Boca Raton High School, Denis formed a club called *We Dine Together*.

The club’s mission is pretty simple and pretty amazing. They go into the courtyard during lunch period and seek out any kids who may be eating alone and invite them to join them for lunch.

One of the members of the club is Jean Max Meradieu. And Jean Max actually quit the football team so he could spend more time with *We Dine Together*.

Imagine that! He gave up the status of being on the football team and all the popularity and perks that come with that so he could spend more time with other kids who had no friends and who were having a hard time.

The founder of this club, Denis Estimon, is now a college student and he spends much of his spare time working to spread *We Dine Together* across the country. There have been over 100 clubs set up in schools since 2018.⁵

In their own way, all of these kids in all of these clubs are humbling themselves rather than exalting themselves. This is what Jesus has taught us. And this is the way that Jesus himself lived.

The Gospel of John testifies that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The very Son of God came to be with us and sit with us.

Paul writes in Philippians that Christ gave up his seat in heaven. He was equal to God, but he was not concerned about his own status and position. He was not worried about his own advantage.

Instead, Christ humbled himself and took on our humanity. He took the form of a servant and came to eat with sinners and with sufferers of all kinds.

And so, God the Host exalted him to the highest place, Paul says. God himself moved him up to the highest place at his own right hand.

The world may seem to be a lunch table where we look out for ourselves and our position. So many are concerned about where they are sitting. Even you and I can get caught up in worrying about ourselves and how we look to God and everyone else.

But Jesus, in his teaching and in his very life, shows us that the kingdom of God is definitely a lunch table, but a different kind of lunch table.

The kingdom is a lunch table where there are plenty of seats. And all of them are good seats.

The kingdom is a lunch table where all are invited to come. There's no need to push or force our way in. God has saved seats for all of us and we are welcome to take one.

The kingdom is a lunch table where Christ and his disciples humble themselves in the service of the poor and the lowly, the hungry and the helpless, the weak and the weary.

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/spreading-the-message-that-nobody-should-have-to-dine-alone/>

The kingdom is a lunch table where we give up climbing all the ladders of success, even that ladder that we think will get us into heaven, and begin lifting up and building up the others around us.

May it be so with you and me.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.