Table manners: Luke 14:1, 7-14

by Tim Conder in the August 21, 2007 issue

As the focal point of our lives, mealtimes reflect the nature of our shared lives. They are a central space for expressions of love, caring and affirmation through both the provision of nourishment and the conversation that surrounds a meal from preparation to clean-up. For those in explosive or damaged families, mealtimes often become arenas for accusation, blame, unbridled anger and painful absences. For those in need, scarcity at the table is a constant reminder of their economic plight.

In the ancient Eastern world, the symbolic and instructional reality of the table was exponentially expanded because the gathering and preparation of food was the day's primary task. In Arabic, the root word for *bread* and *life* is the same (*esh*). This unbreakable link between the table and one's survival was clear—a reality often forgotten in our fast-food-restaurant-on-every-corner world, where food appears on demand.

The link between food and life in antiquity extended to the quality of life. Corporate feasts were the epicenters of religious reinforcement, familial rites of passage, general communication, and ethnic identity for local and national communities. The Jewish meal imitated the formal meals in Greco-Roman culture, where the feast was presented in two stages: a meal proper followed by a time of dialogue or entertainment. As a people defined by their prayers, Jews inserted a series of theological blessings and affirmations into this second phase of the meal. The table truly was the central space.

Given this centrality, Jesus' attention to meals and feasts seems appropriate. Many of the most dramatic moments of his life—feeding multitudes, making wine, dining with "sinners," dramatic self-disclosures—occurred at meals and feasts. But although his strategy seems sound, his table behavior could be called outrageous. Surely a teacher of such significance (he called himself "the light of the world"!) would have had his own table and a substantial home filled with a school of devotees and generous fare. Instead, he was a parasite, an itinerant wanderer who invited himself to the homes of social outcasts and dined with the immoral.

His teaching about the table reflected the scandal of his life. The narrative of Luke 14 finds Jesus once again eating in the midst of his opponents under the tight scrutiny of those who are offended by him and perhaps curious about the inevitable spectacle of his actions. He does not disappoint. The confrontation begins with an unlawful act—Jesus dares to heal a sick man on the sabbath. Then he proceeds to tell three stories with scandalous implications.

His first story scandalizes the social hierarchy of the day. Greco-Roman meals often were set around a U-shaped arrangement of couches that formed a triclinium. (The open space allowed the servers room to move among the guests.) Seating within the triclinium was reserved for those with the greatest status or honor, while those with less honor sat on the outside. The Jewish common meal also had designated places of status and honor. But Jesus encouraged his followers to avoid the seats of honor and to take the humble seats.

The University of North Carolina basketball arena (the Smith Center) offers a parallel. Theatre-style seats with cushions and arm rests are reserved for huge donors and are places to be “seen.” To basketball-crazed Tar Heels, Jesus would be saying, “Go for the upper deck even though you can’t see the game quite as well there.” Jesus is taking the social hierarchy of his day, the systems of clan and patriarchy (paterfamilias), and turning them upside down.

A second story goes a step farther. Don’t invite your friends, family or the economic elite, Jesus tells his listeners; in other words, leave out those who make you feel comfortable, who help you fulfill obligations or advance your status. Invite only “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind”—guests who all have additional requirements and needs without the likelihood of reciprocity. In Jesus’ arena, there is no lower level. The triclinium does not even exist. This exhortation is a scandal of both inclusiveness (the nature of the guest list) and abundance.

The humble far outnumber the elite in any society. Who has enough food to feed the masses? We live in a society of vast abundance that runs on the perception of scarcity. There are only so many spots on the school team, on the admissions lists of elite schools, in the club and in the boardrooms. Our perception of the value of the triclinium seats keeps us in competition with each other. The greater our status, the more we are driven to compete. Jesus challenges this whole dynamic.

Although our text ends here, there is one more feast story. In it, Jesus rebukes the polite rules of invitation. His feast not only has a bizarre invitation list but has a sense of urgency. Reply immediately. There is no one-year grace period for wedding gifts, no month to decide whether you want season tickets. The feast is an urgent demand.

Jesus' teachings take the common table, the center of his world, and flip it upside down. His table stories describe a revolutionary, redemptive kingdom that confronts the norms of upwardly mobile networking and competition. He eschews the expectations of polite society for a story of revolution. This is the nature of the kingdom.

The table of Christ goes far beyond warm memories and the unique bonds of family. At his table, we encounter Christ—and eat and drink in tension with our culture in conscientious objection, in revolution and in fierce hope of a redemptive future.