

Abundant life (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

by [Martha P. Sterne](#) in the [August 12, 1998](#) issue

The most precisely regulated social order that I've experienced was junior high school. The building itself was a forbidding, huge, gray concrete thing with tiny windows and permanent streaks down the sides so that it always looked as if it had been in a drizzle. We had heard that it was originally built as a prison. That made sense.

Life had been pretty simple until the seventh grade. Now we had to learn how to change classes, remember locker combinations and adjust to different teachers and to having homerooms. That was hard enough, but the real dangers lurked in the unwritten rules. I remember two major commandments from which, as far as I could tell, hung all the law and the prophets: (1) At all times, except in PE, girls were supposed to wear very pointed, expensive shoes called piccolinos that my mother did not want to pay for and that hurt a lot; (2) seventh graders would be ruined forever if they went into a ninth-grade bathroom, a catastrophe which I fervently wished to avoid. We were warned that if we went in there, we'd be "flushed."

At any rate, the trouble with being a seventh grader is that "they" make the rules before you get there. Your days are spent scrambling to figure out those rules so that you can get yourself accepted. But when you are struggling to find your place, it is hard to have the will or the perspective to decide which rules deserve to be followed. It is hard to know what to care about and what not to care about. So there you are, scrambling, always worrying about making a fool of yourself. Always praying for the day when you will be a ninth grader and get to make other people nervous.

This understanding of social power--whose power we live under and how to get power and why we need power--becomes a life stance for some of us.

But there is another way. There is a larger, richer world than my experience at Bailey Junior High. In today's gospel, Jesus goes to supper with some churchpeople. They are trying to figure him out and decide where he fits in, if indeed he does fit in. They think probably not, since they've heard about all the ignorant and gauche and

downright disrespectful-to-the-Sabbath things he's done. They watch him very closely, but instead of trying to make polite conversation and fit in, Jesus has the gall to watch them.

A small grin plays across his face as he sees everybody jockey for a place at the table. Dining hierarchy is, after all, deadly serious business: priests at the top, then Levites, then other people according to rank. If people eat at the wrong place, then there's no telling what else will fall apart. (Remember the civil rights lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s.) After carefully watching guests do their subtle ballet of who should sit higher than whom, Jesus says, "Whoa. Why don't you try this? Head for the lowest seat available; then your host will say in front of everybody, 'Friend, come up higher,' which would be a very satisfying experience."

The dinner crowd mulls it over. They have to admit that Jesus has come up with a pretty good idea. Of course, it is hard to trust Jesus with important issues like supper hierarchy because he is known to have terrible taste in dinner companions. He always sits at the tacky end of the table with those who do not have place cards and are not even on the seating charts. He sits with the low and the left-out and--what is worse--he seems to have a ball.

Sure enough. While they are thinking about his suggestion of a new, potentially dramatic and useful approach to dining entrances ("After you"; "No, after you"; "No, really . . .") Jesus comes up with a terrible idea. From the middle of the crowd of rather unsavory-looking characters that he has decided to sit with, Jesus calls out to the people at the best table, "And the next time you have people to dinner, don't ask those who can pay you back. Don't ask anybody who can do you any favors. Ask the poor who won't know how much money you spent on the hors d'oeuvres, only that they are delicious. Ask the crippled and the lame who won't be dancing around worrying about which chair to choose, but will be grateful to sit down. Ask the blind, who won't be watching over your shoulder to see who else is coming. Ask the powerless. Ask the empty. You won't believe what a party you will be letting yourself in for."

The sophisticated crowd, the ones in the black ties using the right forks and saying, "Oh, no more for me . . . I don't care for any," are appalled. The elegant ones who know their place and know the rules look way down the table at the smiling man in the center of a ragtag party of hungry people feasting, "caring for" every morsel, singing, telling stories, crying or laughing until the tears stream down their faces.

The ones who know just what to do and where to be and how not to make fools of themselves, they watch and they wonder. What in heaven's name is going on at the other end of the table?

Communion is going on. The deaf are buttering the biscuits for the blind. The leper goes to get more strawberry shortcake for the lame. And the poor toast the broken-hearted with fine, full-bodied wine.

The evening grows late. Etiquette lessons are over. Time to move on. Jesus stands up, and the one-eyed, crooked-legged, gap-toothed crowd stands with him. They are having a ball, the time of their lives, and they will follow him on and on because everywhere he is, there is a feast. And there is room for everybody at the table, nobody cares who sits where, and everybody shares in the abundance.

It really does beat Bailey Junior High.