

Meals as Enacted Community Luke 7:36-50

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One of the big changes in households in my lifetime is the move away from people eating together for meals. In fact it was already underway when I was a child. I remember being quite shocked when I found out that one of my friends from school had two mealtimes in their house. Mum would feed the kids around 6.30pm. Then she would eat a different meal with dad when he got home from work at around 9pm. My dad was always home by 5.20pm. So we always ate together as a family. And that's what I thought would be normal for everyone. But not for professional people who work stupid hours. Not for shift workers. And increasingly not for families who didn't prioritise that natural connection time. First of all, families might eat together around the TV, so that the value of connection time was diminished. And then as TVs appeared in bedrooms and people wanted to watch different stuff, they would eat in their rooms. And now, doing what we do, that is eating together as a family every night is a rarity. I'm not trying to make you feel bad if that's not your practice. But I think it's a sad direction our society has gone because it eats away at the bonds that bind families together. And it takes away from the opportunity for hospitality as a family. You can't really invite someone to come in and share the life of your family if your family is really a bunch of individuals who don't do life together.

The way we structure our lives
really does impact the community we are part of.
If you imagine yourself in a town in Italy or Spain.
Summer evenings, the whole town is out at the cafes
sharing a meal with friends or drinking coffee.
Everyone in the town knows everyone.
There are no secrets.
That can be a problem if you are ashamed of something.
But everyone knows everyone,
and the people are knit together supporting each other.
Structuring your life so it builds community with others is a good thing.

Jesus used meals to build community.
But he did it in a way that challenged the usual boundaries of the day.
But first a word about how they structured their lives in the first century.
Because it's hard to understand this story
unless you understand that their houses were different to ours.
If you come over to our place for dinner,
you knock on the door.
Hopefully, I hear the knock and answer the door.
You come in,
we sit down and eat together.
Hopefully the conversation flows and people have an enjoyable evening.
But a person who is not invited can't just walk in.
To get in, they would need to knock at the door.
And when I answered the door,
I would say, "Who are you?"
But that's not how it worked in the first century.
They would entertain in a courtyard that was open to the street.
It was pretty normal for people who weren't invited guests
to join in the conversation as they wandered down the street.
Stop for ten minutes, chat to these people,

then go on your way.

There wasn't a hard boundary

between who was invited for dinner and who wasn't.

Though of course if you weren't invited, you didn't get fed.

It was actually a way of setting things up that engendered community

far more than our current set up with locked doors

between our dinner table and the rest of the world.

But what if you got an unwanted guest?

Well no doubt they had ways of moving people on,

just like we do today at parties while everyone is milling around.

Well this is the situation that the Pharisee had

when Jesus came over for dinner.

Jesus was an invited guest.

He was getting fed.

So he reclined at the table.

They sort of lay down on their sides at the table.

Head towards the table, feet poking away from the table at 45 degrees.

And guests could surround three sides of the table.

The fourth side of the table was kept clear,

so that the servants could bring more food and drink out,

and clear up the dishes.

So the meal is going on.

And an uninvited guest walks into the courtyard from the street

and approaches the guests reclining at the table.

Now that in itself is not worrying.

If you are a generous host,

then your reputation as a generous host is only magnified

if uninvited guests come

and join in the conversation around your dinner table.

Then they can go into the town

and tell the story of which important person is gracing your table.

And if the story gets out from a third party,
that's always better, isn't it?
I mean if you told the story yourself,
people would think you were bragging.
So it's far better if someone else lets everyone know
what a generous and gracious host you are
to the most select and important guests.

But as the guest approaches, you realise who she is.
This is a lady with a reputation, you catch my drift.
How embarrassing to have someone like that approach your dinner guest!
The nerve!
Who does she think she is?
"Oh sweetheart, you seem to have lost your way.
Can I get one of my servants to help you find where you are going?
Teacher I am sorry about the intrusion.
I'll get this sorted out in no time."
But no.
The woman is insistent that she hasn't lost her way.
She's come because she heard the teacher would be here.
And then horror of horrors,
she's all over him.
She's making quite a scene.
Weeping loudly.
Holding on to the teacher's feet.
Wiping the tears off with her hair.
Her long hair let down like only a woman without modesty would do.
She's getting the filth from the road off the teachers feet and into her hair.
And she's kissing his feet like only a harlot would.

Simon the Pharisee shakes his head.
He's thinking,

Teacher do something.

This has gone too far.

I'm embarrassed just watching how overly familiar she's getting with you.

Surely the whole world can see what's going on here.

"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is - that she is a sinner."

It's not that Simon thought you actually needed to be a prophet to work out what sort of woman she was.

He thought blind Freddy could see that with his sunglasses on.

Simon thought that it was proof positive that Jesus was not a prophet because no holy man could possibly let this happen.

This is the sort of conduct you expect to see

down the pub on a warm afternoon in the beer garden

when everyone has had too much to drink.

This guy could not be a holy man.

But that signals something to us

about the kind of community Jesus is creating.

Jesus is creating a community where anyone and everyone are welcome.

They are welcome if they turn to him in repentance.

How do we know that this woman had a repentant heart?

Her tears.

She wasn't crying because she cut her finger on a knife.

She was crying

because she regretted the poor decisions she'd made in her life.

And when you come to Jesus with your regret,

that's not just a sign that you wish things had been different in the past.

It's a sign that you are willing for Jesus to turn things around in the future.

Jesus is creating a community that includes the broken.

And he does it around Simon the Pharisee's meal table.

Much to the Pharisee's disgust.

When you look at the Pharisee's words about Jesus, they are in fact exactly right.

"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is - that she is a sinner."

Jesus is a prophet - more than a prophet, but not less than a prophet. He did know what kind of a woman was touching him. And he was fine with it.

Jesus has no qualms about hanging out with people who others despise. In last week's passage he was having a meal at the home of a tax collector. There was no more despised man in ancient Israel than the tax collector. Someone who rips off his own countrymen to pay their oppressors. And here, he allowing a prostitute to get close him. There were no more despised women in ancient Israel than prostitutes. But Jesus eats with both.

Why does he do that?

Jesus explained himself to Simon the Pharisee with a little story.

7:41-42 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender.

One owed him 500 denarii, the other 50.

Neither had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both.

Now which of them will love him more."

This is not a random hypothetical.

Jesus is describing the situation he's in.

Jesus is the money lender.

The person who owed 50 denarii is Simon.

The person who owed 500 denarii is the prostitute.

The money they owe is the offense of their sins to God.

It may well be that the prostitute has offended God more by her sinning.
But Simon the Pharisee is not blameless.
Like every one of us,
he owes God.
And even if his debt is smaller,
it is still a debt he can't pay.
The only way that anyone can be forgiven is for Jesus to cancel their debt.
No one can pay it off themselves.
But, says Jesus,
the one who has the larger debt forgiven is the one who will love more.
The prostitute will love Jesus more than the Pharisee will.
She has a greater understanding
of how much she owes Jesus for her forgiveness.

And we see so clearly that is true.
Who are the people who are most passionate in their love for Jesus?
They are the people
who are most painfully aware of their need for forgiveness.
Charles Colson founded the prison fellowship ministry.
He became a Christian while he was in prison
following his role in the Watergate scandal.
You have plenty of time to reflect on your need for forgiveness in prison.
But after he came to faith,
he was outspoken and passionate in his love for God.
He achieved far more for the kingdom of God than most Christians,
because he devoted his life to seeing other people
who desperately needed forgiveness finding the love of Jesus.

But Jesus is telling the story of the two men who owed money
not to the prostitute, but to Simon the Pharisee.
So the point is not so much how wonderful it is
when those most in need of God's grace grasp hold of it.

The point is how terrible it is,
when the self righteous won't make room
for those crying out for God's grace.
Simon the Pharisee was scandalised
by the presence of the prostitute at his dinner party.
Her dramatic and expressive gestures of repentance for her sins
and love for Jesus
were just too much for Simon.
They were not in his estimation how good people ought to behave.

I wonder how we would respond if a prostitute came to church here.
Particularly if she came to church dressed for work.
Would we scold her and tell her she needs to learn to dress more modestly
before she can come into the house of God?
Do we really expect that God would completely change her life
before she could come along to our church?
I mean it has taken 50 years for God to get my life to the point it is at now,
and he still has plenty of work to do on me.
Why should we expect
that someone else will get their life completely in order
before they are able to come amongst God's people?
I haven't.
Why should I expect that anyone else will?
I know very well that getting more like Jesus in my life is a slow process.
Change doesn't happen overnight.
And even when change does happen,
I find the temptations of middle age
are different from the temptations of youth.
So you might get lulled into a false sense of security.
You see how you have made progress in addressing the sins of youth,
and so you give yourself a pat on the back,
only to have the sins of middle age creep up on you unexpectedly.

So for example, lust and speaking without thinking might be sins of youth.
And those might be easier to control in middle age.
But then when you are 50,
expecting the you will get your own way might be a bigger temptation,
or being impatient with those who haven't yet learned things
it took you 30 years to learn.
And then when you are 80,
then being grumpy and discontented
with things not working as well as they used to,
or being self absorbed about your health problems
might be the biggest temptation.
There's not much point congratulating ourselves
that we have got on top of temptations
that mostly pertain to an earlier stage of life.
And how terrible it would be,
if we were so busy congratulating ourselves
on overcoming the temptations of youth,
that in addition to failing to spot the temptations of middle age or old age,
that we also froze out people who are still struggling,
or only just beginning to realise that Jesus wants them to follow him.

You see at this meal Jesus is enacting a community
that is radically inclusive.
It's radically inclusive of sinners.
That doesn't mean it's radically inclusive of sin.
Jesus has plenty to say about God's expectations of holiness.
But he's radically inclusive of those who are willing to weep over their sin
and metaphorically wet his feet with their tears.

The book of Acts tells us that shared meals
were central to the life of the early church.
It was at shared meals that they made real

their belief that Christians are called to be a community of faith.

Acts 2:46 says these words,

"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes

and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."

The radically inclusive community around a meal table that Jesus began when he shared meals with a tax collector in the story we read last week and with a prostitute in the story we read this week

was continued in the early church.

They regularly met together as a church for shared meals.

It was how they put the community of the church into practice.

We actually lost something important

when we turned communion into a symbolic meal.

I say we, I mean the church not us at Holy Trinity.

But at some stage in the third century,

communion stopped being around a shared meal together

and it became a symbolic meal with a little bit of bread and a sip of wine.

But it was no longer a genuine meal that also had a spiritual purpose.

Communion is still a visible symbol of our community as a church.

We all come up around the Lord's table

and we share in fellowship together around his table.

But it isn't quite the same as sharing a full meal together.

And it doesn't build quite the same sense of community together as sharing a full meal would.

Here's a long range invitation for you.

We will do a full meal together as we share communion

in our Easter dinner on the Thursday before Good Friday.

If you haven't come along to that before,

I invite you to join the community next year.

But you don't need to wait for that to put into practice

Jesus' radically inclusive community of the meal table.

You have the power to invite anyone around to share a meal with you.

Here's a challenge for you.

See if you can scandalise Simon the Pharisee by who you invite.