

12th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17c
Proverbs 25:6-7
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

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There's a certain NPR radio program that always makes my mouth water – *The Splendid Table*. How can these people make me so hungry with just their words? For years the host was Lynne Rosetto Casper. She had a mesmerizing way of drawing you into her passion for cooking good food, whether it was Italian pasta or roast duck or beet salad. Her lush voice communicated warmth and abundance -- and encouragement. Always with the message: You can prepare beautiful food too! www.splendidtable.org

I've never tried even one of their recipes, but *The Splendid Table* always gets me dreaming of what could be... in my kitchen and the world. I dream of a dinner table full of family and friends, laughing and talking and eating, sharing energy and warmth. The kind of table that restores your spirit so you leave refreshed.

In a wider way, I dream of a Splendid Table where everyone has a place. A table that says to each and every person, You are welcome to this feast. Come in from the street and sit down in this comfortable chair, enjoy a warm meal, be at home amid sounds of clinking silverware and happy conversation. You are no longer an outsider – you are someone who belongs.

The dream of a Splendid Table runs all through scripture, because it's God's dream too. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a day when God will bring an end to all wars and set a marvelous feast for all nations to enjoy together:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
...⁸ [on that day, God] will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces... (Is 25:6-8)*

We often read this scripture at funerals, imagining the joys of heaven --but Jesus made it clear that God's Splendid Table is not just for someday, it's for right now. And Christ personally demonstrated what it looks like.

It wasn't dreamy or idealized, the way Jesus lived it. He flaunted every social convention to create a Splendid Table of true hospitality.

In Jesus' day it mattered who you shared your meals with. His culture was intensely status-conscious in a way that might be difficult for us to grasp. It was an honor-shame society, which meant that every social interaction either brought you more honor or more shame – moving you higher up the social ladder or lower down. And people kept track.

We don't have exactly the same mores today, but a parallel might be the way some people strive to create a "personal brand" marketing themselves in person or online. Image becomes everything. A celebrity will be judged by the places they go, the designers they wear, the influential people they know, the power they flaunt. Some public figures are entirely preoccupied with crafting their image.

Even ordinary people often feel the need to carefully cultivate their image on facebook or twitter or Instagram. Unflattering pictures are never allowed. The only news shared is what reflects well on them. To get ahead professionally they may feel pressure to constantly promote themselves, posting shots of them working late, making the big sale, whatever it may be. Our teenagers can also get caught in the trap of anxiously curating their social media accounts to polish their image. But of course there's a danger --when your concern for image overshadows real life and isolates you from loving relationships.

Jesus saw something similar in his day. Mealtimes were socially fraught. Your reputation was defined by who you ate with. If you gave a formal dinner, you made sure to invite guests from higher up the social ladder, to make you look better. If you invited lowlifes, you would end up looking like a lowlife yourself.

But Jesus intentionally broke the rules – and used the social spotlight to be an example of God's radical acceptance. He made a point to share meals with anyone and everyone who was open to God's love. When he spied Zacchaeus, that hated tax collector, perched eagerly up in a tree, Jesus shouted "Get down here! I'm eating dinner at your house today!" You could hear gasps of disapproval all round, but that meal welcomed Zacchaeus into God's community of forgiveness and new life. Jesus feasted with both upstanding citizens and people on the outs, the ones considered misfits, outcasts, sinners. He could care less about losing face, because in God's eyes, *everybody belongs*.

And I imagine that when you shared a meal with Jesus, he made it truly a Splendid Table. I imagine laughter and conversation, Jesus enjoying food and company in an earthy, joyful way. I imagine Jesus drawing each person out with his open, accepting manner, showing genuine interest in each one, making them feel God's warm welcome and unconditional love. And more than this, those meals empowered everyone around the table to see each other in a new way – as sisters and brothers in God's new creation.

Jesus saw the social conventions of his day for what they were: competitive and self-serving. He saw a bunch of insecure people jockeying for position, measuring their eternal worth by where they sat at banquets. And Jesus saw what a waste it all was, destroying any hope for true community.

We see it too. And we also see how we ourselves can diminish life by compulsively worrying about how others see us. And justifying ourselves by putting others down. It can be quite subtle, the way we judge others and measure our worth against theirs, that sly assessment: “I’ve got my problems, sure, but at least I’m handling things better than that person over there!” Part of our psyche is always anxiously keeping score – a human trait that hasn’t changed in 2,000 years.

It’s a colossal waste of energy, and worse-- Jesus recognized it as the root of all hatred and domination. Oppressive systems feed on this insecure dynamic of “we’re better than they are!” which becomes “those others are inferior.” Whether the marker is nationality or skin color or language or sexual orientation or gender identity – it causes untold harm and injury, down through generations. It is rampant today, not just in extreme hate groups but among ordinary people, and it is increasing worldwide.

What does it take to get free of this destructive, self-serving obsession? What spiritual resources do we bring to this broken place in humanity?

Our scriptures point to the quality of humility. Humility is not being a doormat, not making yourself small, or taking up as little space as possible in deference to others. (That’s degrading yourself, not being humble.)

True humility is not thinking less of yourself – instead it comes from knowing your true value. You’re not of less value, or more value, than others -- you are infinitely valued as a child of God – just like everyone else. Infinitely valued by the One who matters, with no need to prove yourself at all. It’s the most freeing thing in the world.

True humility is a quality of life that comes from being certain God has accepted you. It no longer matters where you sit at a banquet table or how many Facebook likes you get. Your worth has been affirmed forever – in God’s everlasting love.

True humility has confidence at its root. It’s a calm, steady certainty that drives anxiety away. And oh, we can all use more of this certainty! in these anxious, divisive days.

And what does it look like to move through the world, centered in holy humility? The ego is not needing to be fed. Your image is not needing to be cultivated. You are no longer driven by insecurity, and you’ve given up that deadly game of putting others

down to prove your own worth. You are trusting instead in God's grace. You are not perfect, but you are forgiven. Unconditionally loved. God's beloved child.

And as for the people around you, the ones you used to see as competitors -- you now see that everyone you meet is God's beloved child. Created in God's image, treasured, cherished, forgiven by the same God who forgave you. You experience God's love as wide and free. It's incredible the compassion and courage that can grow out of this spiritual stance.

True humility allows us to do things we would not normally do—like take on Christ's challenge of sitting at table with people who are not our usual companions. Christ said, When you host a dinner, don't invite only friends and relatives and neighbors. Well, it's exactly what we usually do! We stick with our own, in circles where we are comfortable. But the times we live in – and Christ's example – call us to branch out.

A brilliant example comes from a high school in Florida. We can hardly imagine a place more socially stratified than high school. With cliques and bullying, students learn their place in the pecking order. But in this supremely insecure stage of life, some students possess a wonderful quality of inner confidence, humility and boldness. At Boca Raton Community High School, there's a club called "We Dine Together" that's made up of students who roam their school's courtyard during lunch looking for students who are eating alone. They introduce themselves and get to know them, sit down to eat together, so no one is alone. One of the student organizers got choked up explaining that "Meeting someone who actually cares and listens to what you have to say really makes a difference." These days when many students face the fear of being deported, it can truly be a lifeline. What a gracious and generous way to live! They may not claim religious motivation, but these students are truly creating a Splendid Table in the spirit Christ showed. (huffpost.com 3/13/2017)

First Immanuel is undertaking its own journey of connection this fall, we call it a "journey toward racial justice." Next week we'll start handing out free copies of *Waking up White* by Debby Irving – to read and reflect on and discuss, as a way of increasing insight and crossing over racial boundaries. We can use both courage and humility as we begin. In case you haven't noticed, race is a taboo topic. It takes some courage to dive in, and it takes humility too. Well-meaning people say when you get into discussion, it's guaranteed "you're gonna step in it" at times. Sometimes you'll say the wrong thing. You'll get uncomfortable. But in humility, and because we are certain of God's forgiveness, we can go into these conversations with no fear of losing face. We do it for the sake of love and understanding. Because we have this dream of God's Splendid

Table, where all people share a meal together, equal and free. We want to be part of helping that day arrive.

To help us on the way, you and I have a Splendid Table set before us this morning – in the meal of Holy Communion, which is our own meal shared with Jesus Christ our Lord. Here before us is bread lovingly baked by Geoff Frasier, and a table lovingly set by Elizabeth Phillips. Holy food lovingly served by Pastor Aaron and Leslie and Skipper, received by any and all who come with a heart seeking God. The meal is spread on an altar table crafted by Howard Rasmussen, upon linens chosen by Misty Ibsen. It is received at an altar rail constructed by Swedes generations ago.

It might look like First Immanuel is host of this meal, but truly God is the host. And we are all honored guests. Our Creator sets this feast to refresh our souls and give us what we need to follow Christ in days to come.

This morning God invites you to this Splendid Table – the most Splendid Table of all -- where week by week and year by year, nourished in body and spirit, you and I learn to invite and welcome others too. Thanks be to God. Amen.