

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Taking a Leaf Out of the Attic

Luke 11.37-44

October 4, 2009

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I was secluded in my office on Thursday trying to get the bulletin put together and reading/studying/writing a sermon. The only interruption that I had scheduled for Thursday's work was a meeting with LeDayne Polaski to discuss how our church might support the Polaski family as they have undertaken quite a task – quite a mission – quite a ministry – quite a calling. They have agreed to sponsor the Sam family – all five of them – as they immigrate to the United States from Sierra Leon. Brickson and Annie and their three children: Annette who is 11 years old, Brickson, Jr. who is 8 years old, and Jan who is just a little over 1 month old. The Sams will live with the Polaskis for the foreseeable future. LeDayne was laughing – perhaps somewhat nervously – that she knew how to cook for three people, but she had no idea how to cook for eight. “I guess I’ll learn,” she said – again, somewhat nervously. As she left my office she said ever so calmly, “I need to go home and take the leaf out of the attic.” You see, their table needs to be expanded. As soon as she said it – take the leaf out of the attic – I knew I had at least the sermon title. I’m here to tell you today that the Polaskis aren’t the only ones who need to expand their table. I wonder – do we need to take a leaf out of our attic? And I’m talking about the attics of our own homes and the attic of our church.

In our text for today, Jesus is invited to dinner . . . again. On this World Communion Sunday, I could have chosen from so many texts where Jesus was eating/dining/feasting with all kinds of folks. Sometimes it was with his disciples. Sometimes it was with tax collectors and sinners. Sometimes there was a large crowd, and sometimes it was an intimate setting.

Sometimes there was a miracle involved wherein the food seemed to multiply until everyone had enough, and sometimes he turned water into wine – saving the best for last. Sometimes he did the cooking like at the lakeshore fish fry he prepared for his disciples, and sometimes he sat at the table while women washed his feet with expensive perfume or their tears. But on this particular occasion that Luke tells us about, as on many other occasions, Jesus is dining with the Pharisees and lawyers – you know the ones who were ever so diligent in keeping order and following the rules. The text says *a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table*. It seems that Jesus rarely declined an invitation to a table. I can't help but wonder if he knew that somehow in the breaking of bread sacred connections occurred. If I'm right about that, I wonder what implications that may have for us. How often do we offer invitations to dine together? When do we recognize sacred encounters in the breaking of bread and sharing a table? Or do we spend too much time going through drive-throughs and eating on the run? And when the text says that Jesus *took his place at the table*, I wonder what *his place* was – the end of the table? the head of the table? the middle of the table, like DaVinci's interpretation of the Last Supper? Whatever seat he held, you can be sure that everyone could hear him, and at this dinner, he seemed to have a good bit to say. At this dinner, Jesus upsets the whole gathering right off the bat for not following protocol. He didn't wash his hands! Didn't even use the hand sanitizer supplied for him in the foyer of the house upon entering! But leave it to Jesus - without missing a beat - he sees an opportunity to teach a lesson. Jesus claims that the Pharisees are only concerned about outside cleanliness – the law, the ritual, the rules. He seems to get pretty incensed from the get-go that they are more worried about letters of the law than the essence of his teachings. He basically says – you're concerned about whether my hands are clean or not, but you could care less about what's in my heart AND while you may have the cleanest

hands of all – even right down to underneath your fingernails – yet *you are full of greed and wickedness*. Then he calls them fools. Perhaps not the most polite dinner guest ever. Perhaps he wouldn't be receiving any future dinner invitations to this house. But he didn't seem too concerned about that.

Apparently, they don't even get through the first course of the dinner before Jesus really gets going. This is where he starts in on his *Woe to yous*. He gives three *woe to yous* to the Pharisees and then three *woe to yous* to the lawyers. And if you read on in the story, there's no mention of any food being served or eaten. The chapter ends with these words: *when he went outside, the scribes and Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him . . . [and they decided to lie] in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.* (verses 53-54)

I think there's no mention of any food being served or eaten because the table was too small to really enjoy any kind of meal. The host had apparently not taken the extra leaf out of the attic and I believe they were too cramped and crowded to eat. The *woe to yous* have to do with the outer life of piety while living lives that *neglect justice and the love of God*. Jesus recognized that the group gathered – they were the religious ones, they were the ones that knew everything, they were the ones with all the answers – perhaps he recognized that they sat at a table that was too small. Jesus reserves some of his most harsh saying for those who were supposedly the faithful. So, what does that mean for us?

I'm afraid if we were to invite Jesus over for dinner, we too might just receive the *woe to yous*. I'm afraid that if Jesus dined at our table he would feel a little cramped as if the extra leaf had not been taken out of the attic in a long, long time. I'm afraid that at our tables there's simply not enough elbow room for we have so surrounded ourselves with folks just like us and not

realized that there is a whole big world out there dying to dine with us. They don't look like us or sound like us or even believe like us and therefore, we've not made room for them. We're not good with different, so we play it safe and keep our circles pretty closed. I'm afraid that we may be no better than those dinner hosts from 2000 years ago known as the Pharisees and the lawyers. We absolutely have to find ways to expand our tables – and I mean this literally and figuratively.

Fred Craddock says of this dinner scene that Jesus “is sharply critical of religion that has become self-perpetuating, that has hardened principles given for life into regulations that suffocate and condemn, that has quantified piety and lost its heart, that has, in sum, lost its capacity for self-criticism. Without continual self-evaluation and correction, all structures of religion decay into idolatry.” (Interpretation, Luke, Fred Craddock, page 159) It's easy for us to see how conservative fundamentalists fall into this trap. It's harder for us to see how we who are more moderate, more progressive, more liberal make of our way of thinking and believing idolatrous.

I keep going back to Spain in my mind. That one week on the Camino taught me many lessons. One of the lessons had to do with sharing meals . . . with people from other cultures and who spoke different languages . . . with people who ate at odd times and don't seem to like ice and have never heard of free refills . . . with people who didn't share my same beliefs . . . with people unlike me. I've referenced one book that was important to me several times, and in it I found more truth. Arthur Paul Boers recounts his experience around a dinner table:

“Over and again, meals inspired and drew us together in surprising ways. On our very first day, we stopped at a small but charming hostel in Orisson . . . precariously perched on a Pyrenees mountainside . . . We arrived early enough to shower, do laundry, nap, pray, write in

journals and read. Throughout the afternoon we briefly conversed with other pilgrims, exchanging a few sentences here or there. And like most subsequent days of my pilgrimage, I had the opportunity to speak several languages: English, Dutch, French, and Spanish . . . There was a friendly atmosphere among *peregrines*, but not much sense of connection yet. That evening, however, a dozen of us gathered at a long wooden table for the standard pilgrims' meal . . . clear soup, roasted potatoes, cheap but well-cooked beef that fell apart under our forks, many loaves of bread, red wine aplenty and yogurt to follow. People soon began nodding and smiling at one another and conversing in whatever common bits of language we could cobble together. One man, a gifted extrovert fluent in five languages and a vital repository of good will, sat halfway down the table. [Picture this now and get that famous image of DaVinci's painting of Jesus sitting at the mid-way point of the table. Now I highly doubt that DaVinci's interpretation of this scene is correct. More likely at this last meal together Jesus and his disciples would have been more in a lounging position. But as I read Boers's recounting of the first meal on his Camino journey, the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples came to my mind. This man on the Camino – that “gifted extrovert fluent in five languages and a vital repository of good will sitting halfway down the table” – becomes the modern-day Jesus figure. Boers continues his story . . . that multi-lingual, vital repository of good will] kept looking around and when someone was quiet too long, he asked a few questions and drew that person in once more. He humorously badgered people to sing in their native tongues. So we heard and sang French, German, English, Spanish and Dutch songs . . . I could feel congeniality growing. Conversations took on depth. We began telling each other our names as well as important information about ourselves: our lives at home and our hopes, fears and longings . . . Suddenly we were no longer strangers who all happened to reside in the same place one night in same place. Now we were engaged in a

common project and interested in how things would go for each other. In the next month I was always especially glad when I ran into people from this very first night. Social philosopher Albert Borgmann writes about the foundational importance of the culture of the table. He speaks of the significance of cooking food, sharing meals as family and with others, exercising hospitality . . . As the miles mounted, our schedules and pace varied widely. As time passed, we first-night pilgrims did not see each other as regularly . . . Some of my happiest moments in Santiago, at the end, were running into people I conversed with at that very first pilgrims' supper. A relatively brief time at table touched and fed our hearts for many days and miles, right until the completion of our pilgrimage. It bonded us. Meals together were one of the most significant aspects of the Camino." (The Way is Made by Walking, Arthur Paul Boers, pages 100-102) Our family would have to say that our experience was the same. Table time was some of the richest time of our summer.

I think we need to take the leaves out of our attics. We need to join the Polaskis in expanding our tables. I don't know yet what that looks like in our home. I certainly can't say what it will look like in yours if you were to agree with me. But what about for us? What about this table that is set before us? I'm not talking about a task for the Outreach Committee or playing some kind of numbers game to see how many people we can get in here. I'm talking about how do we open ourselves up and create space for people – people that may not look like us or act like us or maybe even believe like us. I often hear our church described as diverse. We're not diverse. Look around. We can get lulled into believing that all of south Charlotte is the same because our cars only travel the same roads over and over. We have allowed ourselves to believe that "the SouthPark Mall area" and Ballentyne are south Charlotte. Journey beyond your comfort zones sometime and we may find ourselves a little like those Pharisees – clean on the

outside/greedy on the inside. We happen to occupy this one little patch of sacred ground on Park Road, and I want to know how are we going to expand our table. And I want to know who's going to go up to the attic and get the extra leaf. And I want to know who's going to set the table and who's going to learn to cook for 8 instead of just for 3. And I want to know who's going to find his or her place at the table – sitting right there in the middle – “fluent in five languages and a vital repository of good will.” I look out across this sanctuary and I see all the resources that will be needed, for all the resources God has ever needed is . . . us. *Woe to us* if we do not heed the call. May it be so.