

Table Talk July 19, 2026 FPCU Rev. Dr. Tina Blair

Think of some wonderful meals you've had in your life. Meals with family and friends, meals you have looked back on with joy. I have just come from one such meal in Alabama where my cousins and siblings and I gathered sharing food and stories, catching up on what's going on in everybody's life. Such fun!!

Now picture a state dinner at the White House in any administration. The president in the most important seat with the honored guests at his side. No doubt everyone else jockeying to get as close as possible to the president and to be seen by others as having been invited. Or picture the wedding dinner that Taylor Swift and her husband just had with 1000 guests. I wonder who was invited to sit close to them. I think about all the Swifties outside, wishing they could be inside sitting around those tables. Very different type of meals, aren't they?

When Jesus tells these parables, he's sitting at table, at a feast with Pharisees and others. Jesus often uses the idea of gathering around the table to teach. And in this case he is teaching about what the kingdom of God is like, what God wants the kingdom to be and what God expects of us. We are God's guests. Jesus is describing God's kingdom as a feast and what kingdom behavior entails.

The first parable is a lesson for us guests. It is so graphic and common. We can really picture it. Can't we? The guests who think they are so important and plunk themselves in an honored position with the host. And then the poor host has to explain that there are some more important people coming and could you please move down to the other, lower, table. We can also feel the embarrassment of the prideful person who now has to move. We have often heard the moral that Jesus then pronounces, that the exalted will be brought down, and the lowly raised high. In fact, we have heard it in Mary's song back in the first chapter of Luke when she visits Elizabeth:

Mary said, "My heart praises the Lord; ⁴⁷ my soul is glad because of God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!

⁵¹ He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans.

⁵² He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.

By the way, I don't think Jesus meant that we should pretend to be humble so that somebody will put us in a more honored seat and thereby we show off how important we really are. False humility is not being called for here.

The second parable is a lesson for the hosts. Don't invite only your friends and colleagues, expecting them to invite you back as they normally would, but invite instead the people who can't pay you back who are not your social or friendly equals. Now Jesus gets more specific and lists these kind of people: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And again there are echoes here of Mary's song from Luke 1 and Jesus' announcement of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19, where he announce his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah, saying:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed ¹⁹and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

We get the beginning of a glimpse of the radical hospitality called for in the kingdom of God.

The third parable is more elaborate and complex. It expands on and goes beyond the previous two. Now it was a custom at the time to issue two invitations to a feast. The first invitation came well ahead of time to give people time to RSVP -- that they will come, or not, and to put it on their calendar. Then a second invitation was issued when it was time to say that the meal was now ready.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, things had come up and in Jesus' story the guests sent excuses about why they couldn't come after all. I was surprised to learn that these are actually very valid excuses. The first two are important economic issues that would have been understood by the landowners of the time. The marriage excuse was also considered very valid. The first six months of being married excused a couple from any number of social obligations and even excused the man from military duty. And yet they made the host angry, and he invites any-old-body from the streets, from under the bushes -- and even compels them to come to the feast. What is Jesus saying? Perhaps, says one commentator, we are being told that the kingdom of God has priority over everything in our lives no matter how important they seem to us. God comes first. Everything else is secondary.

Do you see how Jesus works this parable? Up through the excuses in his story, it sounds perfectly ordinary, but now comes the shocking part. The master sends his slave out to invite to the banquet the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. We have heard these people mentioned before, haven't we, in the previous parable of the host. And again, we hear echoes of Mary's song and Jesus' announcement of his ministry. We hear echoes of what the kingdom of God is really about. And the story continues. The master goes even further and invites and compels people who are sleeping under bushes — in other words the homeless.

I bet the man who declared “Blessed are those who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” did not expect to share bread with those people! And his kind of people aren’t even mentioned!

What are we to do with this parable? I wonder in what ways you hear it. Because there are many ways, of course, and those ways change with our situation and our age and with what’s going on in our world. That’s what parables are supposed to do. That’s why this is called the Living word of God. Therefore we invite the Holy Spirit to guide us each time we study scripture.

Several things strike me.

1. I am struck by how important gathering around the table is for Jesus for Jesus. The kingdom of God is a wonderful banquet, like a family gathering filled with joy, abundance, comfort. And so I think that all table gatherings are important. All table gatherings carry an echo of God’s kingdom, of this messianic banquet. This is true at breakfast, lunch, and dinner at home. And it’s true at church with our fellowship after worship on Sundays, with gathering for chili cookoff, with our St. Patrick’s Day and other feasts. We are remembering, in a way, that we are part of this kingdom that God is creating, and we are modeling what this kingdom can be and will be.
And especially every time we gather around this table, the table of the sacrament of Holy Communion, we step into God’s kingdom, into a moment of eternity in which we sit at table with Jesus, our host, and are fed the manna of eternal life and the cup of salvation. We keep the symbols of this feast, the plate and the cup, and the table itself, front and center always – to remind us that every Sunday we are gathering at this table in the kingdom of God.
2. It strikes me that all these parables tell of what we call the Messianic Reversal, or the Great Reversal: the last will be first and the first will be last. Mary predicts it in her song when she is pregnant with Jesus. Jesus announces it when he begins his ministry in Nazareth. **The kingdom of God is not like the political kingdoms of our Earth.** That can be so difficult for us to understand! This is not how powerful kings, presidents, and other leaders work as the feast at their table. Instead, in the kingdom of God, it is the humble, the meek those who care for others who are welcomed first. It is not the people in powerful positions or leadership. It’s not even pastors and elders and deacons who will necessarily be first. It is those neglected by society for whom God has the greatest concern because no one else cares for them so God has to.
I don’t think that means that we privileged leaders will necessarily be excluded, but we certainly won’t have the places of honor.

3. It strikes me, finally, **that the kingdom of God demands radical hospitality.** We are not simply required to hand food out to the poor. We are required to sit at table with them. We are asked to invite them into our gatherings. We are to expect that we will be with people very, very different from us economically, socially, culturally, etc. It's Jesus' family, gathering around a table loaded with food and joy and stories. It's very different from our safe, relatively small, family, gatherings, or from our politically charged state banquets.

So what does all this mean for us here at first Presbyterian Church? I can think of several implications. I wonder which one you would feel that Jesus is teaching you. Perhaps Jesus is teaching us that you and I are welcome in the kingdom even though we have little power in our society, in terms of wealth, or politics, or stardom. **We are the ordinary, overlooked ones are beloved, and invited to sit at table in the kingdom of God.**

Perhaps Jesus is teaching us that **we are to show radical hospitality to each other within our own community.** We have gone through conflicts and tensions, as often happens in churches and other communities. We all want a community of support, understanding and love. Do we perhaps need to find ways to reach across divisions in new ways?

Perhaps, finally, **these stories provide a lens** through which we can examine what we already do. We can use the descriptions that the mission study researchers are coming up with about the ministries of their church. At this time, they are interviewing each official and unofficial team to get your input. Using these parables, we can ask ourselves: in what ways do we exhibit the kingdom of God? We can name those things we're doing right, according to the parables: as for example, those table fellowships that strengthen our community. They echo what Jesus is talking about when he describes the kingdom of God. And we need to evaluate what is not working as well and what we feel called to do to exhibit radical hospitality as we go forward.

I think we are well on our way to doing that. I know that it's never comfortable to engage in self-examination and evaluation. It means a certain kind of honesty and confession that none of us ever really wants to do — but as Christians we do that anyway. and as a church in transition, we know we need to. We are well on our way with good leadership, great participation on your part, and God's guidance. The Holy Spirit is alive and at work in this congregation so rejoice! And let's join in feasting together. Amen? **Amen.**