

WHO'S AT THE TABLE?

It doesn't get more basic than eating and eating.

That is something which every human being who lives--indeed who has ever lived--must do every day. Among humanity's most ancient activities are the procuring, the preparing, and the ingesting of food and drink. It is the absolute necessity for personal survival.

Given their archetypal significance, then, no wonder there are so many eating and drinking stories in Holy Writ. Ignoring for the moment the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, specific simply to the story of Jesus, it seems clear that its telling cannot be accomplished apart from this basic set of functions.

In the first three Gospels, for example, there are the several stories of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes, references to leaven and salt and sowing seed, memories of the troubles that Jesus and his disciples get into as they pluck heads of grain with which to feed themselves or as they are observed to eat with unwashed hands. There are parables of banquets and wedding feasts and great suppers, and that story of the rich man dining sumptuously while the afflicted Lazarus looks on. In John's Gospel, there are the further stories of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, the water-into-wine miracle at the wedding feast at Cana, and Jesus' deliberate comparisons of himself to the bread of life and to living water.

Then, of course, there is that scene in the Upper Room on the night of the Passover meal. In eating and drinking terms, we call it the Last Supper or the Lord's Supper, which is not just a remembering of a meal that occurs way back then in Jerusalem, but an honoring of one that we believe is of such importance that we have an eating and drinking that are taken ritually to their very highest level.

If we can get our heads around all this, then the next point follows rather naturally. And that is this: What a huge step in the evolution of humankind has to occur when the previously-mentioned procuring, preparing, and ingesting of that food and drink come to include the intentional sharing of it with others. After all, the neighbor with whom you are sharing a slab of meat is probably one who is less predisposed to clubbing you to death with his stone ax.

Taking such a momentous step, eating and drinking aren't anymore about just personal survival; involved now is something social and interpersonal. In that, there is a movement from me to us.

How that "us" gets lived out is extraordinarily germane to the telling of the Jesus story. What we see depicted in our Gospel narratives is that there is not a single story of Jesus eating alone. Whether he is feeding others or eating with others, there are always others. There is always someone at table with Jesus.

At times, that fact becomes problematical for him, for his choice of meal companions tends to draw a certain amount of negative criticism from those in power. To begin, there are the Twelve, an unlettered, unrefined group of men who, while they are reported to follow Jesus everywhere, are also repeatedly reported never quite to understand him. What a bunch of ringers they are! It is, remember, they who are present at that sacramental Last Supper, too, and who are the same who betray, deny, and abandon him.

Further, beyond that rough, clueless lot are those who, for one reason or another, are part of his larger following, Jesus having no compunction, as was heard in the charge leveled at him in this morning's reading, about "eating with sinners and tax collectors" (2.16). They are at table with him. Why, no scrupulously observant Jew would ever put himself in such jeopardy--sticking his hand in the same bowl with someone who,

in failing to abide by the rules of cultic purity, is bound to be unrighteous and therefore in the position of unavoidably defiling others. But they are there with Jesus.

This is precisely who is typically at table with Jesus--the untouchables, the undesirables. As a notable parable from Luke's Gospel puts it, at table him are, symbolically, "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Lk 14.21)--in short, all those who in that society are destined to be thought ill of, discriminated against, pushed to the margins of the community, and excluded. From the picture of Jesus that we have in the Gospels--which, remember, are collectively the "Good News"--it seems clear that he consistently seeks out and befriends all whom the majority culture prefer to push to the edges, and persecute, and force underground.

If we take a discerning look at Jesus' table, that's who we'll see eating and drinking with him. That's the choice every time that he makes. Apparently, if we are truly followers of this Jesus, that's the choice that we must be making as well. There's no getting around the unsettling implication that, whoever they are, and wherever they may be on life's journey, these are the very folks that we, too, need to be including in our fellowship and inviting to our table.

Now, I need not tell you that it takes principled and courageous people to follow Jesus' lead--to be open to the maligned and the marginalized, and to be affirming of the neglected and the rejected.

Who is at Jesus' table? A good question. And the answer is, why, absolutely everyone! There are those who refuse to sit down and join him, of course, but none are singled out by him, for any reason, and turned away. None.

On this Communion Sunday, perhaps the more pressing question is this: Who is genuinely welcome at our table?