

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, September 2, 2007

Text: **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

“Table Fellowship and Faithful Life”

I saw them eating and I knew who they were.

That is a Middle Eastern proverb that Jesus probably knew.

Maybe it makes little sense to us in these days. *I saw them eating and I knew who they were.* We live in a fast paced world where there are fewer and fewer moments when we actually take, or make, the time to sit and dine together. Families do it less and less because everyone’s schedule is increasingly crazy. Students often eat on the run, skipping breakfast, grabbing a quick lunch; dinner may be a pizza in front of the TV, or a sub sandwich that is eaten at the computer. Studies show that more and more of us are dining out. I think you know what I am talking about – meals around the table, with sincere sharing and conversation, which deepen our souls and enrich our lives, happen less and less in our culture.

But in Jesus’ culture, what you ate and with whom you ate were some of the most critical matters. Hence, the Middle Eastern proverb – *I saw them eating and I knew who they were.* (see B. B. Taylor, Christian Century, March 1998, p. 257)

For the Jews especially, eating together has long been – literally – a religious experience. To eat together is to celebrate faith. Cleanliness is paramount – clean food, clean dishes, clean hands, clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal is a worship service as people honor God by making sacred the most ordinary details of human life – like eating together.

This is why Jesus’ table manners, or lack of table manners, and Jesus’ meals offended lots of people, especially religious people. The passage says that “when the Pharisees saw Jesus going in a house to dine, they were watching him closely.” He was, in the minds and hearts of many, breaking too many rules: he did not practice “proper cleanliness” with himself or those with whom he enjoyed table fellowship. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He thought nothing of sharing the table with the filthy, the poor, the broken, the irreligious. So they were watching him to have their suspicions confirmed – he had contempt for religion; he had lost his sense of what was right; he was condoning sin by dining with sinners.

But our passage today is powerful because it affirms once again that faithful life is not simply about table manners, but compassion. Faithful life is not fundamentally about obeying lots of rules about mealtime and meal behavior (though that may be helpful sometimes); it is not finally about whatever other rules and rituals we might come up with. Faithful life is about living with love and generosity. Faithful life is not about proving your cleanliness at the table, or how you deserve a place of honor because of your righteousness, or thinking so highly about ourselves, which is pretty tempting. Faithful life is living with righteousness by living with humility, and extending your heart and welcome to the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the most needy. Then, Jesus says, you will be blessed.

In other words, he gives new and deep insight to that Middle Eastern proverb. *I saw them eating and I knew who they were.* Jesus wants us to sit around the table, even this table, but sitting around the table always intends to feed us so that we can feed the world in love and hope, in generosity and caring. Jesus knows the importance of real table fellowship and how sacred it can be. But table fellowship and meals are sacred as we are sent to serve – serve the needy, serve the world for God’s hope and light. Gathering around the table – the meal table, the Lord’s table – is very important. We live on food and fellowship and faith. But it is more critical that our hearts be filled with love for others, and that our lives be shaped in the ways of discipleship.

In a meeting this week of those in our church who oversee all of our partnerships in Malawi, I was reminded of a young man that some of us have met in Malawi. His name is Felix. He lives in Mulanje, in southern Malawi, where we have many contacts and partnerships. Actually, Felix works at the Mulanje Mission Hospital, the place where Dr. Sue Makin serves, the place where Emma lived last year for 6 months. And the place where Sandy Evans lived and worked the previous year.

Felix works for the hospital, but he is not a medical person. Felix is more of a farmer, an agriculturist. Across the years, and especially recently, the hospital has learned that they cannot just serve the medical needs. The hospital has to be involved in all aspects of life – and farming is part of life in Malawi. Everyone has to grow crops, their own crops, or there is not enough food. So Felix works at the hospital, and he maintains a magnificent garden. The point of the garden is to teach new mothers, and even new fathers whose wives died in childbirth, or new grandmothers who lost their daughters in childbirth, how to maintain what is called a “kitchen garden.” Before these folks go home with a new baby, the hospital wants to be sure they can sustain themselves through the kitchen garden, and get food on the family table.

So Felix is part of the Mission Hospital’s attempt to make life better, more wholesome for the region. For families to survive and thrive, they need a kitchen garden – a small plot of various crops that will meet many of the family’s needs. So he teaches people how to plant and grow the right things that nourish the body. He teaches how to raise chickens and use their fertilizer for the crops. He teaches how to conserve water and manage the weeds. He teaches how a small plot, well done, can indeed sustain a family. So after the people learn these things across a number of weeks, they are sent on their way, with seeds, with baby chicks that can grow and lay eggs and then become meat for the family. He sends them on their way with knowledge that will help them live and prosper. In fact, on the days that I met Felix last year, he was spending his nights sleeping in the chicken coop because hundreds of little chicks had been born, and he was offering his own body heat to keep them alive so that they could grow enough to be given to the people in his ‘kitchen garden’ class.

And Felix is just another person who exemplifies what the church, and what our partnerships are increasingly about, in Malawi. Ministry, especially in the most struggling parts of the world, is about the gospel message of Jesus Christ, which is about hope, love, and life for all people. And that gospel is about medical care, and education. That gospel is about meeting basic needs. It is about agriculture and “kitchen gardens” so people can eat and have sustainable life. That gospel is about growing chickens, and for Felix, sleeping with chickens so they survive, so they can then serve needy families, especially orphans and others. That gospel is about giving people hope.

The proverb says – *I saw them eating and I knew who they were*. I am pretty sure that Jesus is smiling on Felix, and who he is eating with, and what he is doing to help people eat, find life and hope.

Folks, we did absolutely nothing to be born into the families that we were born to. Just about all of us were born to families where there was plenty to eat. We live – even with drought and challenge – in the land of plenty, where we do not depend on ‘kitchen gardens’ to sustain us or our families. Most of us have not slept with chickens to give them warmth so that they can live and grow to produce and provide for us. Most of us eat without thinking about all the people in the world who do not have enough to eat. Most of us eat more than we should.

But that proverb still applies – *I saw them eating and I knew who they were*. What might Jesus say about our eating and our compassion? When we gather around the meal table, are we mostly seeking to keep and hold the places of honor? Or are we thinking about the world and how there are many who need to be fed? It is our Christian responsibility to help feed a hungry world. There is no getting around that expectation from our God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves and serve others – they will be exalted.

Every hour, hundreds of children die of hunger related causes around the world. Every minute, we continue to spend millions on bombs, instead of bread. It is not, as Socrates put it, that the unexamined life is not worth living. For Jesus, it is the uncommitted life that is not worth living. We are all, each of us, to engage in commitments that make the world better, to feed the hungry, to love well, to do justice, to promote healing and hope, to walk humbly with God.

I saw them eating and I knew who they were. When Jesus sees us gathering here, it is to be fed – fed with God’s presence, fed with food for our journeys, fed with love and life. But all of it is only so that we can go and feed the world, go and love and serve, go and make life better for others – that is to be our commitment, that is to be our life. We are not just people who pray and praise God in this place. We have to be, as I understand it, people who serve God, who care about poverty and hunger, and who seek to change things for the better. Hunger is something we can solve. Christians must be people who work at it. Table fellowship – here at the Lord’s table – and around all of our meal tables – feeds us so that we can feed the world. Table fellowship is nourishment for our hearts and souls and lives, so that we can share nourishment with the world. We are people who know God’s love and care and blessings. We are to be people who share those blessings with all the world – by working to wipe out hunger, by feeding the needy, striving for a world where all have enough to eat, and all find life and hope, which is what God offers and intends. Alleluia. Amen

Prayer: As we know your love and sustaining presence, and as we experience nourishment and love around the table, we commit our lives, O God, to sharing love and life everywhere following Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, September 2, 2007 by Alex Evans, pastor. This is a rough manuscript.