

A Seat at the Table (Lk. 15.11-32)
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I can still remember the feeling, the slight gnawing as I neared the end of the line, pushing my tray. With every step I got closer to the lady at the cash register. Soon she would tell me how much I owed, I would pass her a few bills, she would hand back my change, and then the relative safety of the line would end. After the cashier one had to keep moving. Two more steps to the double doors that opened onto the junior high school cafeteria.

For most of my academic career the cafeteria was a happy place. In grade school it seemed filled entirely with friends, in high school it provided a welcome break during the middle of the day, in college it was a place to meet coeds for lunch, and in seminary the quality of the conversation was both more serious and more funny than any I'd ever had. But there was one year when the cafeteria was a place of great anxiety for me. It was my seventh grade year, the first year of junior high. That was the year that we were all thirteen, governed by the physical and emotional travails of that age. It was the year that we left the comforts of the elementary schools where we had ruled the roost to enter at the lowest rung of the social strata in our new school. It was the year when we lost many of our former classmates in the shake-up of honors programs and course choices. It was a strange and disorienting year for me, and these feelings were highlighted nowhere more strongly than the aforementioned cafeteria.

I can still remember trying to take a deep breath as I stumbled forth with my tray. In the far corner sat some of the kids from my neighborhood. We went to elementary school together and they would probably let me sit with them. But that kid Mikey had

taken to giving everyone new nicknames, so it could be risky. Just ahead of that table sat all of the band kids. Some of them were my friends, but they always talked about band, kvetching about experiences that I hadn't shared; I didn't really feel at home at that table. In the dead middle of the cafeteria sat the kids that everyone called "the stoners," although at other schools they were called other things. They defiantly wore heavy metal t-shirts with skulls and jeans with the knees ripped out, laughing and swearing loudly as if daring the teachers to do something about it. Not too far from them sat the honors kids, my peeps, also known, since it was the 80s, as the "dorks" or the "nerds." They were usually talking about books and I would more often than not go sit with them. Sometimes, though, they would turn to business; as I was a library aide, they'd want the scoop on what had just come in or if I could renew their books another time. And then near the exit door sat the coolest of the cool kids. You guessed it, the football players and the cheerleaders. A number of them were my friends, too, but I had learned that this did not carry over into the cafeteria. In the cafeteria there was a sort of unspoken rule that only football players or cheerleaders could sit by the hallway door. No one ever questioned this rule and no one ever broke it. It had been passed on by generations of kids in blue mesh jerseys and short pleated skirts. And while the basic table arrangements held, there were always a few kids scattered here and there eating alone. I never had the courage for that sort of thing, so it was usually the kids from my neighborhood or my fellow nerds. Setting my tray down at an empty spot, they'd greet me. "Hey, it's Jeremy. What's up Germ? How's it going, Rut?" or "Have you finished your science fair project? I think I can place this year."

I hadn't thought about the junior high cafeteria in ages, having fairly well blocked it out, until a few months ago, when it all came crashing back into my consciousness at a clergy luncheon. On the day in question we were welcoming a noted professor to Houston. A. J. Levine is a self-described Jewish feminist scholar who teaches the Bible, particularly the Christian Testament, at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Much of her work has been that of situating Rabbi Jesus and the gospel accounts of his life and teachings within their historic Jewish context. Of late, she has been working on the parables and had come to talk to us about new ways of reading the parables. I was actually helping to host the event, so I arrived early to meet A. J., talk about the introductions and the flow of presentation and discussion, and then find her lunch and seat her at a prominent place around the great table that would accommodate maybe thirty or forty people. She and I had a lovely conversation as we prepared for the luncheon, and soon ministers from around the city were collecting their lunches and taking their seats. I noticed right away.

On the far side of the table, directly across from A. J. and myself, sat all of the Lutherans in an organized row. My friend, Ginny, a former schoolmate now a UCC minister, sat next to me. All of my other peeps, the UCC clergy and Unitarian Universalists who were there also sat on my side. At the ends were mostly Methodists and a few Presbyterians, who, though smaller in number, managed to find each other. And I believe there were one or two Roman Catholics who snuck in here or there with a boxed lunch among the dear dissenting Protestants. The reason I know all of this is that we had an opening icebreaker exercise to let A. J. know who was there, and you could hear it as we went around the table. Lutheran, Lutheran, Lutheran, Lutheran. Methodist, Methodist. UCC, UCC, UCC. Unitarian, Unitarian. I couldn't help but smile as they

spoke, hearing the old junior high labels in each voice. Band, Band, Band, Band. Stoner, Stoner. Nerd, Nerd, Nerd. Jock, Jock.

Surely by now you're wondering about the parable. Well, as it happened, this morning's parable came up as we sat around the table and spoke with our visiting scholar. You might expect that we stumbled into something groundbreaking related to it. After all, it's one of the richest stories that Rabbi Jesus ever told. Indeed, just reading it aloud is enough to bring tears to some our eyes; I remember last time I read it how many of you sniffled. For it's the tale of the prodigal. It's the story of the son who went away from home, squandered his inheritance, and then, coming to his senses, returned again to make amends with his father only to find the most ridiculous and undeserved welcome of all. A feast. A celebration. A fatted calf. A dizzy moment when the slate was wiped clean and only love seemed to count. Surely thirty or forty clergy and a professor from Vanderbilt could peel back the layers of this story and find hidden wonders to share with our congregations. Right? Well, yes and no.

What didn't happen over lunch was the revelation of an insight so grand that every one of us left the room with a song in our heart and a sermon in our mind. But what did happen over lunch was the revelation of an insight so small that it has followed this minister ever since. It was an insight that reminded me not only why we read the parables over and over but why we read them together. For sometimes, even when we have read and studied these texts over many years, we can glean new meanings. Yet often it takes someone else reading with a different perspective to help us. So here's the insight that A. J. Levine shared: After years of work on the parables, she was rereading this parable with a graduate student. He was a young, African-American man, whose life

experience had been understandably different from her own. After they read the parable, filled with its themes of waywardness and fidelity, the differences between an older and younger brother, and the unexpected graciousness of a smitten father, the black graduate student had one response. “What about the slave?” he asked.

A. J. shared with the clergy that, in all of her readings, she had never paid particular attention to the slave. Actually, there is not one but two slaves mentioned in the narrative. We are talking here about the second slave, the one the older brother called to ask what was going on. This slave is actually given a speaking part. “Your brother is here,” he says, “and your father has slaughtered the fatted calf because he took him back in good health.” Afterwards, the focus shifts away from the slave, he returns to the margins as the older brother pouts and fumes that no one killed so much as a goat for him. Yet what of the slave, the graduate student asked. What of the character in the story who has no place at the table whatsoever, existing only to serve the two relatively privileged sons who are fussing over inheritances and feasts? And here there are a lot of ways we could go. We could ask about so many who have been left out or continue to be left out in significant ways in our society, including the oppressive histories known to people of color, women and children, gay and lesbian people, migrant workers, or any number of groups. We could ask about the structures that hold such inequality in place from racism, sexism, and homophobia to the radical disparity in access to wealth, quality education, and affordable health care. We could ask about how this relates to our understanding of what Rabbi Jesus seemed to be teaching with many or most of his parables, some idea of an egalitarian beloved community to stand in contrast to the segmented status quo with which society has taught us to go along. These would all be

good ways of following the student's question. But today we might begin in way that is both simpler and more complex, a way that is a bit closer to home. We might begin with ourselves.

It seems to me that the hard truth of the junior high cafeteria is still on display in our adult lives. Daily we move in circles of friends and colleagues, groups of people with whom we are linked for various reasons. Here are the people in our workplace, there is the bridge group or the book club. Here is a professional organization, there is a church committee. Here are the neighbors from our block, there are the city workers digging to fix the water main. Whether we mean to or not, we are constantly sorting each other into groups, putting each at their respective tables or, what's worse, into their roles as servers or guests. And the question that we might each ask ourselves is the question of who is being left out in any given situation we find ourselves in. Who is the slave that we grouse to without noticing? Who exists at the margin of the story, offering a single line in search of recognition? Who have we not seen, when we have been over the story, played out the pattern, so many times that we're blind to it? These are not easy questions to answer and they are not questions that can be answered alone. For none of us can see what we can't see; we all need the others to reflect the different viewpoints that can only be glimpsed through our varied human experiences. So the men among us need the women. The straight among us need the gay. The adults need the children. And more than this. The privileged need the underprivileged. The comfortable need the suffering. The orthodox need the radicals. Only once we are all invited into the conversation can we ever really begin to understand who has not felt included before. A part of the challenge of our faith, then, is to find ways to continue the conversation by constantly

adding seats around the table, welcoming everyone from the privileged son to the spurned slave into a newer, more beloved community.

At the end of the clergy lunch, we thanked A. J. for her remarks and hob-knobbed for a few moments before rushing back to our respective offices to put the finishing touches on our weekly sermons and homilies. I don't know how my colleagues might have been affected by the day, but I do know that the question of who is being left out has haunted me ever since. And, though I do not know the name of the black graduate student, he being as anonymous to me as the slave in the parable, I have taken his question as a challenge and a gift. "What about the slave?" he asked. To which we might add, "What about anyone who has not yet been offered a seat at the table?" This Lent may we find the courage to ask these questions. And, shuffling out into the world, trays in hand, may we find others with whom to sit and share them.

Amen.