

“Inverting Order” a sermon based on Luke 14:1, 7-14 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 1 September 2019.

Competing - for jobs, research grants, prizes, power, medical treatment, for recognition. In some parts of the world, people compete for the basics of food and water. In some families, children feel they compete for attention and love.

When people apply for work, they are expected to highlight strengths, talk about accomplishments, name awards, elevate themselves to stand out from other applicants. No one is expected to highlight mistakes or failures or weaknesses. With an emphasis on competition, we can imagine we need to perform better than others, to work harder than others, to be more noticed than others. Life becomes about achieving more than what others achieve.

The spirit of competitiveness can grow according to our feeling of scarcity, that there isn't enough love or resource or recognition to go around, so we have to be more assertive in order to claim it. And, conversely, we can become reluctant to share what we have worked to achieve.

The spirit of competitiveness can creep into our core, our way of being, until we hardly notice it. Even when there is evidently enough ...

Before I began as minister of a congregation years ago, I thought I would surreptitiously slip in to worship to see what it was like on a typical Sunday. I arrived a little after the service began and found a seat in the back pew. Someone came in after me, and I glanced around. As the person moved towards the pew in which I was sitting, her facial expression made it evident I was sitting in her seat. I looked around and saw that in a church of about 500 seats, 400 were uninhabited, but that was not the point. My life was in danger. I moved.

Yet if there is anywhere a haven from competition, it is the church.

We come here to be detoxified, to be reoriented, to be freed of unhealthy anxiety and harmful judgement and demeaning criticism, to remember our spirit, our core, to get in touch with life that is full.

Ideas and beliefs and values compete but people don't need to compete here - we know we are equally loved and held and cherished by the God of Jesus Christ, and that within the body there is a place for everyone.

We don't need any sense of superiority over other churches or congregations, because we know that God uses all, in a way that is distinct to each, to embody and communicate the love of God.

We don't need to compete for attention or influence, because each part of the body has its role and purpose.

The church is a haven of cooperation rather than competition, a place where egos are hung on the pegs at the front door, a people where we look for everyone to flourish, a community where those least publicly recognised are given special honour.

And all this around the table.

Meals of the time had great social value. Invitations to a meal from the wealthy were a measure of one's cultural status. U-shaped tables defined the social order. The closeness of your place to the middle of the U indicated your importance to the host. The middle seat was the most coveted seat. If you were seated at the ends of the table, your place in the social order was obvious.

Guests reclined at the table as food was served. They ate and conversed. They talked together, sharing wisdom. These meals were the privilege of the male upper class. But more than that - if you were invited to such a meal, you had to respond in kind.

Jesus observes how the guests try to get the best seats at the table.

And he reminded them of the wisdom of their tradition.

It's in the book of Proverbs – Do not put yourself forward in the King's presence or stand in the place of the great for it is better to be told "Come up here" than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

They knew the honour of being ushered forward and the shame of being ushered back.

Those who heard this parable would have known it was the kind of God Jesus proclaimed. In Mary's song – he has brought the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. In an early Christian song, contained in Philippians – Philippians 2: 5-11. They were reminded that they too had been the lowliest, slaves in Egypt.

For generations people have been inspired by this vision of society, of honouring those society demeans. It's what inspired Bishop Selwyn and the first Chief Justice of New Zealand William Martin to assert Maori rights to land in the early years of Pakeha settlement. It's what inspired the Reverend Rutherford Waddell to be the first secretary of the Seamstresses Union here in Dunedin, asserting reasonable work conditions for women. It's what inspired the Women's Christian Temperance Union to petition for women's suffrage. Is it what inspires us to honour the humble achiever, the Ed Hillarys and the Valerie Adamses?

This happens at the table, the space where we experience grace and extend grace, the space where wisdom is shared, the space where a community's identity is marked.

A near eastern parable said "I saw them eating and I knew who they were."

For Luke, "nothing [is] more serious than a dining table." Fred Craddock.

It is where Christ is revealed. It is where the Spirit is promised to come. It is where Jews and Gentiles are reconciled. It is where Jesus gathers with tax collectors publicans and sinners. It is where Jesus gathers us as a sign of service and acceptance, as equals in the breaking of bread.

Table fellowship involves full acceptance of one another and inclusion of the socially ostracised. Christian communities continue to be formed around offering welcome to strangers.

L'Arche communities, founded by Jean Vanier who died earlier this year, create life in community with people with severe disabilities.

And the practice of table hospitality has revitalised congregations like ours, when they have reached to eat with those least welcomed by the community around them. In so doing we participate in the very life of God.

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes: "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others and invite them in—even our enemies."

Our experiences of community echo the goodness, grace and truth we find in Jesus. Building faithful communities is at the heart of our grateful response to the one who "became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

It happens around the table.

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