

**“A Limitless Table — No Reservation Required”**  
**A Homily by Paul Brouillette for the people of St. Nicholas**  
**2 September 2007 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Jeremiah 2:4-13 + Psalm 112 + Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 + Luke 14:7-14**

As many of you know, Judy and I spend a week and a half in Alaska this past July. All in all, it was a wonderful experience. The people who live there were very hospitable and they told us a lot about their rugged lifestyle. But one thing we did notice about most of our fellow travelers was their need to always queue up in line for everything. They seemed to always demonstrate a “me-first” attitude, even when being first made no difference.

It made no sense to me to line up to get on the plane when everyone’s seat was already assigned or to line up to get on the ship to go to one’s pre-assigned cabin.

In some cases lines are necessary for survival. I saw plenty of them when I spent nearly a month in the Soviet Union 25 years ago. This was especially true in the northern cities of Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev, where basic items like bread were scarce. In the Central Asian republics like Uzbekistan, we found food to be a little more available in the open markets.

In the ancient Eastern world the daily gathering and preparation of food was a primary concern. In fact, in Arabic, the root word for *bread* and *life* is the same (*esh*). This unbreakable link between the table and one’s survival was clear — a reality long forgotten by us. Nowadays, if we feel like having a Big Mac, a Whopper, or a foot-long sub, all we have to do is stop at the next corner.

In antiquity the connection between food and life extended to the quality of life. Meals together were the focal point of religious celebrations, family gatherings, rites of passage, and with their varying styles identified ethnic groups.

In this context it seems very appropriate that the most dramatic moments of Jesus’ life took place at meals and feasts. Consider the feeding of the multitudes, making wine at a wedding feast, dining with “sinners,” and the institution of the Eucharist.

Of course, his approach to such events was, to say the least, a little unconventional — maybe even outrageous. You would think a great teacher such as he would have had his own table and a substantial home filled with his followers serving a gourmet fare. Instead (God forgive me for saying this) he was a parasite, an itinerant wanderer who invited himself to the homes of social outcasts and dined with the immoral.

In our gospel selection today, we find Jesus once again eating in the midst of his opponents under the tight scrutiny of those who are offended by him. You can just picture them waiting to hear Jesus say something scandalous. And, naturally, he doesn't disappoint anybody. At first glance it appears that Jesus is simply giving a lesson on table manners, an aid to seating charts to help avoid a social embarrassment. But there is more here than mere etiquette.

Jesus starts his parable with a reminder that embarrassment haunts the heels of anyone who assumes he or she is more important than they really are. Imagine the scene if you were escorted out of your seat at the head table in front of an entire banquet room because you foolishly sat in the seat of the guest of honor, only to be removed when the real guest of honor arrived! It would be like a late-comer to a wedding taking the empty seat on the first pew reserved for the mother of the bride. Talk about a faux pas!

But as bad as this would be, Jesus is not just adding another page to the Table Etiquette chapter of the Good Manners Guide. No, Jesus is up to something much more culturally subversive, which becomes obvious when he turns his attention from etiquette for the table guest to etiquette for table hosts. Up until now, all heads could nod with approval, as Jesus warns about false pride in assuming a table seat too lofty. It is good advice, but safe. No one's feathers get ruffled by this counsel to guests at the table. But what about his word to those who host the table, including the host of that very meal, a leading religious leader of the town?

*“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, . . .”*

*(Luke 14:13-14)*

Did anyone see that one coming?! Suddenly all the nodding and approving heads jerk back in shock. Good manners are one thing, but now Jesus is meddling with the way the world actually works. He's suggesting that this system tends to benefit the powerful and wealthy. When gifts are merely trades, then there is no pure gift at all. At risk in such a system is the one who has little to exchange. He or she tends to be snubbed from the invitation to life's good table.

But Jesus tells us to invite everybody, all the "nobodies," to transgress class boundaries. Let's not lower our standards, but have no standards to begin with. This is the way to entertain strangers. Who knows: according to the writer of Hebrews, we may "have entertained angels without knowing it."

In an ancient Eastern story, heaven and hell are exactly alike: Each is an enormous banquet where the most incredible, delectable dishes are placed on huge tables. Those who partake in the feast are given chopsticks five feet long. At the banquet in hell, people give up struggling to feed themselves with these awkward utensils and remain ravenously unfulfilled. In heaven, everyone selflessly feeds the person across the table.

So let us prepare a limitless table, and here, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, receive Christ in bread and wine, Christ present, remembering us and calling us each by name.