

Dinner Conversation

Several, actually lots of lifetimes ago, I was selected with 7 others, to represent my Girl Scout Council at the 1963 Roundup at Button Bay, Vermont. There would be about 10,000 Scout representatives, 2500 adult leaders, camping together for 2 weeks along the shores of Lake Champlain. One of the keynote speakers was Maria Von Trapp, not Julie Andrews, but the real Maria von Trapp. I still remember the point of her speech - "A bell isn't a bell until you ring it/ A song isn't a song until you sing it/ and love isn't love until you give it away."

I digress. Back to the point: We cooked and ate our meals in patrols, groups of 8 with a couple of adult guests. During the preceding year, there were all kinds of training experiences. One of which was a semiformal type dinner, when we learned all about using the right fork, and how to carry on sustained and polite conversation first with the guest on our right, then the guest on the left.

We've all attended those occasions when we're mostly on our best behavior, times when the food, the friendships, and the conversation is all good until... I remember one in November of my last year in seminary. It would be our first Thanksgiving dinner, with folks who became life long friends. The guest list included Cass and me, my roommate at seminary, and a seminary professor, Sue Hiatt, who proved herself not only friend but mentor.

Two friends of Sue, provided dinner at their home. All was going well with lots of laughter, good fun, and perfectly cooked turkey. Finally the table was cleared and dessert was next on the agenda. Out came the pumpkin pie, - which was sort of an olive drab color - definitely not golden, baked pumpkin brown. Out of Sue's mouth came the question most of the guests were only thinking ... In her own inimitable way, Sue asked, "this is all very well, but why is the pie green?" The silence was stunning.

When we look at the Gospel lesson, It becomes startlingly clear that Jesus flunked Polite Conversation 101. He managed to bring the conversation to an embarrassed halt not just once but twice in the same meal, on precisely the same topic as the previous chapter - healing on the sabbath. Is it right or wrong to heal on the Sabbath? "Is there anyone here who wouldn't rescue your child, or your draft animal from the well on the Sabbath? They were all watching him - and then the silence got deep, really really deep. I wonder how many of those fellows began scratching their eyebrows.

He continued in a similar vein all the way through the meal. He looked at the guests, all religious leaders and canon lawyers and watched them trying to force their way into the best seats, then quoted scripture, from Proverbs 25 which says, *6 Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; 7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.*" Another conversation stopper.

Then he looked at the host and did it all over again; "*When you throw a dinner party,*" he said, "*don't invite the folks who can pay you back with a party at their house. Invite, instead, the folks who cannot possibly return the favor, the lame, the halt, the blind, the widow, the poor, the outcast, or as Eugene Peterson put it in his translation, The Message, "invite the folks from the wrong side of the tracks. You will be a blessing and receive a blessing"* Was Jesus totally clueless? Why else did they invent the power lunch?

Friends, all joking aside, is this lesson about anything more than a little bit of good advice, and a chance to wonder just how obnoxious a very human Jesus could be?

Remember that line???? *If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.*" or as the *New Revised Standard Version* puts it, *Luke 14:11 (NIV) 11" For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Do you also remember hearing this: "the first will be last and the last will be first." "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who*

humbles himself will be exalted." That great reversal that is God's doing, that is the promise, the Kingdom of God is part of this Gospel lesson.

That great reversal is both yet to come and present here, not yet and now. We see it coming in the halting steps of social progress in this land, where women vote, and are ordained (at least in some traditions), where Martin Luther King offered his dream and some of it is realized, where same gender couples can marry in some states, and finally experience federal tax equality in every state.

We see it here and now - as a grand equality at this table, the sacred table to which all are invited. The young, the old, the frail and the strong, the women and the men, those from the north, the south, the east and the west. All are welcome at this table, and in the words of the great communion hymn, written by Elaine Kirkland and Phil Porter,

Come, gather in this special place;
The table here is long and wide.
For all who heed communion's call;
There's room for thousands, side by side.

In the church and our world, the great reversal is both now and not yet; coming and certainly incomplete. How will we know when the Kingdom is complete. Let me give you an image. How many of you have ever witnessed a beloved infant child, with a full round tummy, wrapped in a clean, soft blanket sleeping soundly, completely trusting, completely at peace, totally love? When every child, every, every, every child gets to sleep in such a fashion - the Kingdom is complete, until then we the church are called to be in the kingdom building business.

What is true out there is also true within our hearts. Within our selves, the great reversal is both now and not yet. Remember that great list of virtues and strengths that Paul called the Fruits of the Spirit? The love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control list?

Is it not true that we as human creatures have the capacity to become loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, generous, faithful, people? Both human and humane?

Is it not also true that we can be cowardly, apathetic, fighting, violent, stingy, harsh, impatient, greedy, judgmental people who will betray another's trust and confidence when it suits us well? Do we not have greater and lesser selves?

Did not Paul also write, Romans 7:15 (NRSV) 15 *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."*?

We have all these capacities within our very selves. Friends, when we try to deny our lesser selves, the more powerful they become, the more energy they absorb, the more energy they steal.

But, when we acknowledge to ourselves and God - yes, I can be loving, and I can be apathetic or even hateful. Yes, I can be generous, and yes, I can use/ abuse others for my own benefit. In that truthfulness of spirit, the kingdom comes within, I am set free for my better self, my more noble self, my loving self.

Friends, I believe that God so loves us in our noble **and** in our lesser selves, that God so cares for each of us in our frailties **and** our strengthes, and in loving all of who we are that God sets us free for love, joy, peace, patience - you know all that good stuff. I believe that in our loving, in our kindness we become the instruments in God's hands that bring about God's dream of the great reversal, which is nothing less than the kingdom, nothing less than the kindom of God.

What do you believe?