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Scripture: Table Talk - Luke 14 – Mission

It's at the table that we can turn a house into a home, a stranger into a friend, and a village into a community. But more than anything, eating together simply connects us. And our world could use a little more connection right now.

This year let's eat together on June 22.

This movement #EatTogether was started by, anyone? President's Choice (PC). The grocery people. Is anyone aware of this initiative by President's Choice? I first saw one of the commercials for EatTogether this past June in a theatre as I was waiting for my movie to begin.

But President's Choice actually introduced Canadians to their "Eat Together" campaign last year, as a way to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary. The video you just watched premiered during the January 1, 2017 centennial outdoor hockey game held in Toronto between the Detroit Red Wings and the Leafs.

It begins with a woman riding in the elevator in her apartment building, disturbed by the number of people around her distracted by their electronic devices. She convinces her roommate to set up a large dining table in the apartment hallway, eventually enticing the other tenants to bring out their own food and join the dinner party.

#EatTogether was a dramatic shift in marketing for President's Choice who typically focus on product innovation. Eat Together placed the focus more on the people around the table instead of the food that is on it.

In a press release launching the initiative, PC declared: *We've never been more connected as people, but in many ways we've also never been more disconnected We thought food is a great way to bring people together and reconnect them, even if it is within your own family.*

Building on the momentum of last year's launch of Eat Together, PC focused this year's video on getting Canadians out of the routine of eating alone, especially in the workplace.

This year's 90-second commercial shows a girl growing from infancy to adulthood, with casual and significant events of her life– linked by friends, family and food. It closes with her sitting silently at a desk, surrounded by colleagues, all eating lunch alone. It asks the question: *We grow up eating together. Why do we stop?*

Has anyone seen this video? If you were at movie theatre in the spring, chances are it was playing in the previews. If you haven't seen it, google PC #EatTogether and check it out, it is powerful.

In the press release for this video, PC declares: *We're on a mission to get Canadians to Eat Together again. And there's no better time to start than now. This year, let's put down our phones, let's close our computers, and let's Eat Together.*

Interesting that our culture is beginning to catch on to something that Jesus highlighted 2,000 years ago: the importance of the table and eating meals with others.

Welcome to North Park, my name is Paul McIlwraith, teaching pastor here. If you have been with us throughout our summer message series, you will know that our focus has been on food, hospitality and the importance of the table for connecting people to one another and to God.

It is interesting that if you read through the gospels of the Bible, specifically the gospel of Luke, Jesus didn't run a lot of projects. He didn't establish ministries, create programs, he didn't even put on events. He ate meals with people and it was around the table that he did some of his most profound teaching.

Meals create natural opportunities to share lives and to share the gospel in a context that resonates with people. As President's Choice so accurately describes, food is a powerful way to bring people together and connect them and it is in the connection where lives are shared and people see the hope and faith we have through Jesus and may be open to hearing about it.

I got this wonderful note from a woman in our congregation this week. She said that her daughter was invited by a friend to spend a week at a cottage with this friend's family. The daughter knew that her friend didn't attend church but thought that the parents still might. Listen to what this woman wrote me about her daughter's experience at the table at this cottage.

As they sat down around the table for their first meal together, my daughter waited for all the family to be seated before starting her meal. When questioned why she hadn't started eating, she explained that she was waiting to see if they were going to say grace.

There was a moment of silence and then the Dad responded, "We used to. I don't know why we don't anymore." He then proceeded to say grace and did so at every meal for the rest of the week.

Isn't that great. The table provides those opportunities to share our lives and our faith.

If you have your Bibles, I would encourage you to turn with me to our text for today, Luke 14.

Here we find a series of illustrations or parables around a meal. In the first part of the chapter, Jesus is eating in the home of a prominent Pharisee, a civic and religious leader of the day, and he observes the way the guests are clamoring for the best seats at the table.

He uses the occasion to teach the people about humility and the dangers of trying to raise your own social status by where and who you sat with at a meal.

Then Jesus turns to the host and says this in **Luke 14:12-14**.

"When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward.¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

This must have been a very puzzling comment Jesus is making to his host, this Pharisee and it may be just as puzzling to us, today. I can imagine Jesus kind of leaning towards this man putting his arm around his shoulders and saying, when you put on one of these spreads, host one of these shindigs, don't always invite all of your buddies. Don't always choose your family. All those people who are just like you. That is what this Pharisee has done here.

His guest list is made up of people from the same socio-economic strata of society as him, other Pharisees, lawyers, teachers. Those who think like him and act like him. Those who go to the same church as him, shop in the same stores or vote the same way as him. So what is the problem with that?

I mean, we probably do that too, don't we? Invite those we feel most comfortable with around our table?

Just think back over the guest list of your last dinner party or special meal or occasion. Who made the cut? I would suspect it was probably much like this Pharisee. You probably had family members, those from your neighbourhood or your workplace, friends from school. Usually those that share many of your same values right? Again, what's the big deal?

What Jesus was addressing in his comments to the host here had to do with a deeply engrained cultural practice called reciprocity. Reciprocity was a gifts and obligation system that tied everyone into this intricate web of social relationships in this day. It was the idea of reciprocation. If you invited someone to your table, then there is the expectation that they will invite you back, they will reciprocate.

Hospitality in Jesus' day was extended with the idea that you would get an invitation in return somewhere down the line. It was an obligation. It was the "reward." If I invite you to my table, then I can certainly expect an invitation to your house sometime in the near future. At least I better!

But is that much different than in our culture today? Don't we think like that? Do you think like that? We are due to have the Joneses over to our house because they had us over last, or we have to invite little Susie to our daughter's birthday party because she invited our daughter to hers.

We have to give them a housewarming gift because they gave us one. Or we have to do this because they did that. Some people keep a running list in their head of reciprocity even today. I owe them this or I am owed by them this and it can undermine the underlying purpose of hospitality. Which is love.

In Jesus' day, there was a system in place to care for the poor.

Providing food for those who were hungry in Jesus' day was not formalized like our food banks and various meal programs today. Food was distributed to those in need but it was always through the back door not the front. The middle or upper class in Jesus' time would very seldom invite someone beneath them, of lower socio-economic class, into their home.

To do that would risk contamination because you know – those poor folks, dirty and smelly. You never know where they have been and they really have nothing of value they could offer back in a relationship.

No real reciprocal value, so they were tossed a few scraps of food out of pity, mostly out of the back door and then kind of shooed off to be on their way.

Beyond their own household, people generally preferred to eat within their social class in Jesus' day where reciprocity can be enacted, and I think we operate much like that today.

That is why Jesus' words here in the text would have been surprising to the host he was addressing ... maybe they even catch us a little off guard.

Luke 14:12-14,

"When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. ¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

To Jesus, the table was a place where grace was enacted and love was to be poured out. It wasn't a scorecard where a running tab was kept on who did what for whom.

What Jesus says to the Pharisee host in this passage would have stunned him because what Jesus was proposing was so counter cultural that if

implemented, it would change everything in the way that people interacted. It would collapse the distance between the rich and poor. It would bust through the walls that determine who was in and who was out in the society.

And that sentiment sounds so good to us doesn't it? Like that President's Choice video. Can't we all just get along? Can't we all just be connected, like one great big happy family? Where everyone is treated the same no matter their race, no matter how much money they have. Oh, for a world where there is no prejudice, no bias, no special treatment, no pressure for reciprocity.

That ideal sounds so good but when push comes to shove, I am not so sure that is what we really want. I mean, it was this sort of thinking that ostracized Jesus from most in the society of his day. It also got him killed by those in positions of power.

They couldn't image living in the kind of world that Jesus was proposing.

Can we? And before we jump too quickly to answer, I wonder. If we were to do an audit of some of the different activities and ministries we do around the church, how many of them would involve some reciprocity? How many of them would involve or expect some payback?

Do we see our youth program designed to reach out to lost and vulnerable young people in our neighbourhood no matter the cost to us or is its primary purpose to provide a safe haven for church kids?

Do we see our small groups involved in doing adventurous mission together and open for others seeking Jesus to join in or are we cozy, closed off cliques?

Do we see our worship music prayerfully and thoughtfully drawing us in praise towards Jesus or is it frantically trying to appease the musical and stylistic tastes of individuals?

Does our preaching and teaching unpack the biblical truths of scripture that reveal Jesus' hope for our lives or does it seek the approval and applause of the audience?

Let me ask you a question today. When you think of this place and the ministries that you are involved with here, is your predominant mindset: *What's in it for me?* That's reciprocity. I give but boy, I expect something in return.

Or do you lay awake at night wondering what God can do through you and your resources? Or what God can do through this place and these resources that he has blessed us with to make a difference in the lives of the people in our neighbourhood, city and world with no expectation of receiving something in return? That mindset is different than reciprocity; that's love and grace and Godly humility.

It is interesting that Luke repeats this phrase.

invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind

Luke 14:13

and

invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame

Luke 14:21.

These four groups, *the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame*, were like a catchall phrase in scripture that represented those who were on the margins of society. Those who were the powerless and the vulnerable of Jesus' day.

This group would have included the widows and the orphans, the tax collectors and the sinners. They are included under this banner; the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

I wonder who this grouping would include in our world today? Although the words aren't so politically correct in this day and age, who are the *poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame* amongst us? Maybe today, it is those struggling with mental illness? Maybe it is those struggling with addiction

– to drugs, alcohol, pornography. Maybe it is the panhandler on Adelaide Street.

What is our attitude towards the marginalized in our world?

Do you know what I have come to believe? *Our attitude towards those deemed to be on the fringes of society is directly related to our experience and understanding of God's grace in our lives.* Just think about that. **Repeat it.** To realize that but by the grace of God, and the hand of fate, that could be us.

To understand that we are saved not because of anything that we have done or can do, but because of what God has done for us through his son, Jesus. He loved us so much. There is nothing we have done to merit it. It is a free gift. We don't have to do anything to keep earning it, we don't have to pay God back. We just have to receive it.

In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, there is this wonderful picture of God's grace and salvation depicted as a meal, a banquet feast. It says in **Isaiah 25:6-8,**

*In Jerusalem, the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will spread a wonderful feast
for all the people of the world.*

*It will be a delicious banquet
with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.*

⁷*There he will remove the cloud of gloom,
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.*

⁸*He will swallow up death forever!
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears.
He will remove forever all insults and mockery
against his land and people.
The LORD has spoken!*

It is a lavish meal where God is the host and we are all invited. We receive the love and grace of Jesus by taking a seat at the table.

We all were once on the margins, on the outside, but now we have been invited to the table. When we understand that, it helps us to be a little more gracious and understanding to those on the fringes in our world. We have taken a seat at God's table and we are to welcome others to come sit with us, especially the *poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.*

In **Isaiah 58:7**, God spells out pretty clearly what true worship of him looks like:

*Share your food with the hungry,
and give shelter to the homeless.*

You want to worship me? God asks. *Start with this; share food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless.*

Do you know that for each one of us here today who professes to be a follower of Jesus, there is one thing he has asked us to do? Does anyone know?

Luke 9:23

... follow me

... follow me

We are called to follow Jesus into a broken world – to visit the places he went and do what he did.

Donating money to the needy is good but simply writing a cheque keeps those who are poor at an arm's length. It keeps them at the back door.

In the Bible, Jesus is called a *friend of tax collectors and other sinners.* **Luke 7:34.**

A friend. Remember in Jesus' day, to welcome and sit with a person around a meal was to extend friendship and acceptance. That is why Jesus' habit of eating with tax collectors and sinners was so scandalous. Through his actions he was stating, *these are my people!*

I think the church in general and North Park in particular do good work in reaching out to those in need around us. We pack mission services gift bags

for the poor at Christmas. We provide a full Christmas meal for all the staff and students of Lord Elgin, a school in a lower socio-economic area of London.

Many of you are involved in serving in places in the city that reach out to those who are disenfranchised. All great things, but my experience is that we tend to put up boundaries when offering help to others. Especially those who seem a little different than us. We can prepare and serve meals to the hungry but very few of us find it easy to actually sit and eat with them, talk to them.

When people are different from us, we find it more comfortable to cook and clean for them than to share a meal and a conversation. I think many of us struggle with simply being present with those in need so we hide behind an apron or a food counter or broom or a drying towel; too busy to talk to someone because we are serving them.

But do you know what that mindset perpetuates? Reciprocity.

When we swoop in and serve the poor and the hungry, as a program, as an activity to do our good deed for the month, we create this hierarchy, where they now owe us or at least that's the way they feel.

They owe us thanks and gratitude for being so benevolent as to give up time in our busy schedules to come downtown, find a parking space (it's busy down there), to spend a couple hours a month serving coffee or washing dishes.

We think that we are demonstrating the love and grace of Jesus when we serve or donate to the poor, but that only takes us halfway. We have missed the social dynamics.

What we are communicating to those we serve is, we are able and you are not. I am doing this for you; I hope you are grateful. We cloak our superiority in compassion but superiority cloaked in compassion is just patronizing.

Does it sound like I have some experience with this? This has been a growth area for me. Let me explain and give you a glimpse into how petty my heart can be. My general philosophy is that as leaders in the church we often ask you to serve in our various ministries. Over and above your school, your job, your family life. So, I should be willing to serve as well. Only makes sense right?

Since I spend most of my time at the church, I look for areas to serve outside of this building, in the community. A couple of years ago, I heard about Ark Aid Street Mission, whose mandate is to serve those on the margins of society. That really appealed to me, to serve those in need. That's noble, isn't it? So, I signed up to help serve a meal to 70-80 people, one Monday a month, downtown.

Honestly, I truly wanted to serve but I was hoping it would be somewhat mindless. I engage in so many emotionally charged interactions in my work as a pastor, I just wanted to go and plop some food on a needy person's plate, give them a smile, walk away feeling like I had done something good with my time. Something more productive than scrolling through Facebook or Instagram posts.

A few days before my first shift at Ark Aid, Wayde, (do you remember Wayde? I had him up here a few weeks ago to talk about Ark Aid), buzzed me and said, "Paul, do you mind leading the devotional for the people before the meal?" Agghh! That was my first reaction. Agghh!

Sorry, Wayde.

But, that's what I do that all the time; prepare and deliver talks. Can't I just go and be anonymous? I don't want to be the pastor at Ark Aid! I just want to be the guy that slings some grub, serves some coffee, cleans the tables.

That first night, after I struggled my way through the devotional, I was assigned the task of serving coffee with another person. That was okay, walking around room asking what people wanted in their tea or coffee, exchanging a few pleasantries, but it was

busy and at one point I noticed that my serving partner had disappeared.

I was getting backed up with orders and I looked up and saw that she was sitting, sitting at one of the tables talking to one of the people we were supposed to be serving. My initial thought? *Slacker. I need some help over here.*

I went home that night. Carolyn asked how things went. Generally, it was a good night. I felt good about helping but then I said to her, “You know, some of the people didn’t even say thank you. I served them coffee, brought it to their table and they didn’t even say thanks.”

And as the words were coming out of my mouth I had this conviction from God. *Paul, you are lamenting that some people didn’t say thanks to you but who did you even make an effort with ... ask how they were doing, how their day was, ask them their name? Sit with and share even a two-minute conversation?* Embarrassingly, the answer was, no one.

I went in with an aura of superiority, expecting people to fawn over me with gratitude and I walked away convicted of my motive and challenged in my spirit. From that day on, I made it a mission to engage in at least one meaningful exchange with someone at Ark Aid each time I serve there. I have had some wonderful conversations and met some good people.

As God has changed my heart from an attitude of superiority to compassion, I have come to realize that everyone that I lock eyes with at Ark Aid or anywhere in London for that matter, were made in the image of God and except for maybe a bad break or decision here and there, they could be me and I could be them.

We are all equal in God’s eyes. All loved ... and there is so much we can learn from each other, no matter our position or lot in life when we break through the systemic barriers that seek to separate us and instead invite God to bring us together.

Think of how different the dynamic is when we sit and eat with someone. We meet as equals around the table. We share together, we affirm one another and enjoy one another’s company. People do not want to be projects, they want relationship and community. This is what can happen when we gather around a table. That’s what Jesus modelled for us in the gospel of Luke and what he calls all of us to.

It’s at the table that we can turn a house into a home, a stranger into a friend, and a village into a community. But more than anything, eating together simply connects us. And our world could use a little more connection right now.

Maybe PC was on to something with their #EatTogether campaign. But their idea is not original. It comes from God. He has invited us to His great feast and has encouraged all who love him to invite others around out table. Especially those who may be different than us because;

you never know where and how Jesus will show up at the table and you never know where and how Jesus will show up in the table talk. **Amen? Amen**

Let’s pray.

Points to Ponder

Table Talk ~ Luke 14 ~ Mission

1. Discuss with your group, President's Choice motivation for their #EatTogether campaign, *It's at the table that we can turn a house into a home, a stranger into a friend, and a village into a community. But more than anything, eating together simply connects us. And our world could use a little more connection right now.* Has this been your experience? Describe examples of the way that eating together has connected you to others.
2. Think back over the guest list of your last dinner party, special meal or occasion. Who was invited around your table? Was it people that were pretty much like you or was there some diversity? What motivates whom you invite? How do the dynamics shift when there is diversity around the table? Give some examples.
3. Think about the concept of reciprocity. Does this idea of "payback" influence your decisions of how you give and receive? Is there some unspoken pressure to reciprocate in your life? Is reciprocity a factor in the church? In what ways? Discuss some pros and cons of reciprocity.
4. What do you think of the following sentiment? *When people are different from us, we find it easier to cook and clean for them than to share a meal and a conversation.* Describe an experience you have had where it was easier to serve than to engage in a conversation. Why was that so?
5. What is stopping you from inviting someone that the world says is not your equal around your table?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically in this area of reciprocity in your life. Is the mindset of payback limiting your freedom to engage with people God has placed in your life? Pray about that and for opportunities to create equality around your table.