

Every few years when debates about Immigration heat up, there are conflicting views about how decisions can be both practical and just. The question is basically who should have a place at the table and who should not?" But this debate is the same in disputes between workers and bosses, republicans, and democrats, young and old, rich and poor. Life is full of such struggles about seating plans, who sits where, and who should serve whom.

Everyone assumes certain things about their place at any table. Many want to host. Others simply want to eat. Some want to determine the menu. Others want to be concerned about the leftovers. We worry about getting stuck at the foot of the table and would rather always have the places of honor. Is life fair? Is your living fair to others? Who gets to decide?

When I was 10, we were returning from living 3 years in Germany where my father was stationed as part of the U.S. Army. It took us many days to cross the Atlantic in an old troop transport converted for carrying military families. I will never forget sailing into New York Harbor and seeing that Statue of Liberty and knowing that we had arrived in America. I had never seen it except in books, but when I saw it I knew our journey was finally over. We were safe. We were home. I was headed for the table that felt familiar, welcoming, and safe.

Consider our many ancestors who saw that as they arrived at Ellis Island, and millions before and after who came as immigrants because of a message on the statue that welcomed people from around the world. On that symbol of America's promise is the phrase, "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free!" That seems to proclaim a wonderful commitment, but we wrestle with what it means, why it should happen, and how to achieve such lofty goals in a world of limited resources. For just opening the door without ability to serve guests isn't much of an invitation at all.

As we struggle with jobs that will never come back, ever expanding costs of social programs, threats of terrorist attacks, drug lords who prey upon the weakness of addicts and those who are fleeing responsibilities at home, any conversation about who is coming to our table becomes conflicted. To be honest, our worry is often whether we will be served as we deserve or forced to become servants to others. And that is a tough discussion.

One day Jesus observed how each guest at a dinner assumed where they should be seated. Jesus lived in a culture with many traditions about respect and honor. Rules were important; guest lists mattered and sitting with the wrong people was considered more than just poor taste as it could offend religious unity. He had been invited to a

dinner and everyone watched to see what he would do. He discussed how our expectations can get us into trouble.

Some simply wanted an excuse to get rid of him and no longer have to be challenged by his teaching. He turned the tables on them and instead watched everyone else. As some fought for the best seats and others refused to sit at the foot of the table, he asked, "Wouldn't it be better to sit at the back of the bus and be invited to the front, rather than assume the front seat and be told to move to the back of the bus?" Now that is getting up close and personal!

It quickly got their attention. How about yours? Luke's Gospel seems so passive to the reality of our culture, doesn't it? Whether one is a leader of business or labor the struggle is the same. Whether someone is a criminal or a cop, the disparity continues. Why allow someone else to have an advantage? Why should I be expected to sit at the foot of the table? Isn't the goal to get to the top? Why serve when others can serve me? I remember something that happened several years ago that brought my attention to this in a personal way.

Before ending a visit with our son Chris and his family, we went to a museum full of old steam locomotives – an impressive look at the past! As we were preparing to head home, Chris asked if I had a sermon for Labor Day weekend. I said I was sure I had written one, but wouldn't worry about it until I got home. He said he would write me one. And he did. When I caught up on emails I found one that said "thanks for being a good servant" and it had a sermon he wrote while we were driving home.

My first impulse was "no way." And then, "how could he do this so quickly? And finally, the appropriate response was to be filled with love that he cared so much that he would take time to serve me in this way. And it was pretty interesting. He began by discussing the origins of Labor Day, as he discovered that Labor Day was created to celebrate the hard work of the railroad workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was recognized in 1894 following a bloody railroad strike, in which many died at the hands of the military and US Marshalls.

He felt it so fitting that he and I visited a museum in which we could see first-hand the result of (as Chris said) the "blood, sweat, and tears" of those workers over 100 years ago. His comment remembering the losses of life to build the trains, lay the tracks, and suffer during the conflict of a great train strike was to let that be a Labor Day reminder of a greater labor of sacrifice – in the love of Jesus Christ for you and me. A God who served rather than demanded service! What moved me most by Chris's sermon was his emphasis on servant love. That our "labor" as Christians is to wash feet, prepare the table, and invite guests.

He is right. Labor Day is a national holiday, but for Christians, our labor is always loving service, and we celebrate that gift and make every day "holy" by serving! And as I

thought about sharing my sermon, it made sense to first comment on what Chris had done – which was to sit down and do something special for me. When anyone does what they don't have to do, except out of love, is that not a reminder of the message which Jesus proclaimed when he climbed on a cross rather than insist on being lifted up on an earthly throne?

Is this not the lifestyle of discipleship that Jesus lifted up when he knelt down to wash feet rather than insisting that his followers come and serve his every need? Is this not the message he proclaimed at the dinner party when Jesus said it is more important to be a servant than to demand to be served? That is the model of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He came to dinner party but not to sit at the head – he came to serve, beginning with those at the bottom of the ladder. His life was lived for those on the "bottom of the food chain." His love is for you and me, and our response is to love in the same way! I did have had a sermon that I was ready to put on the table.

And then my son put another one in front of me. The words he shared were well thought out, but more important was his willingness and desire to help me out. That was his real sermon to me! As I think about it, he was inviting me to sit down and let him serve the meal. And when any of us seek to do that for each other (and even more when it is for people we aren't expected to serve) we are engaged in a holy day of labor ... or a labor of holy love!

No longer should we ask who deserves a place at my table, but celebrate how wonderful that we have been invited to Jesus' table. And from that feast he calls us to help others find their way to the feast he has prepared for all. And the only way that happens is in our willingness to serve. We can't feed, serve, or heal everyone, but we need to pay greater attention to the ways in which Jesus can.

Besides that, when we sit at the foot of the table, or are willing to sit at the back of the bus, are we not more likely to bump into Jesus himself? For we know where he always chooses to sit! And now it is time for us to pull out a chair and help others enjoy his meal!