

Immigration is one of those issues that evokes heated debate. How can solutions be both practical and just? The basic question is ‘who should have a place at the table and who should not?’ Such debates follow similar patterns in the same way as 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. Most hope not to be stuck at the foot of the table and if honest would prefer a place of honor. Is life fair? Is your living fair to others? Who gets to decide?

As a child, we returned from 3 years in Germany where Dad was stationed with the Army. It took six days to cross the Atlantic in an old transport converted for carrying families. I will never forget sailing into New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty, knowing we had arrived in America. I had only seen it in books, but when I saw it for real, I knew our journey was finally over. We were safe. I was headed for familiar and welcoming tables grandparents, uncles and aunts we hadn’t seen for three years. We were finally home!

Consider millions of others who weren’t coming home but leaving their homes because of a welcoming message on the statue. The phrase is “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free!” That proclaims a wonderful commitment, but we still wrestle with what it means, why it should happen, and how to achieve such goals in a world of limited resources. To open a door without ability to serve guests isn’t much of an invitation at all.

Every such conversation about who should sit at the table and who should not is full of passion, conflict, and confusion. If completely honest, our worry is often more selfish as we worry about having to serve others. It’s 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 from several years ago that brought my attention to this in a personal way.

With a holiday right around the corner, I am reminded of a visit with our son Chris, on a Labor Day weekend years ago. We went to a museum full of old steam locomotives – an impressive look at the past! As I was preparing to head home, Chris asked if I had a sermon. I said I had written one, but wouldn't worry about it until I got home. He said he would write me one. I laughed, but he did. When I caught up on emails, and read one from Chris saying, "thanks for being a good servant. Here is a sermon I wrote while you were driving home."

My first impulse was "no way." From Chris? And then, "how could he do this so quickly? The more appropriate response followed, which was to be filled with love that he cared so much that he would take time to serve me in this way. He said Labor Day, which was created to celebrate the hard work of the railroad workers in the 19th century,

made even more poignant following a bloody railroad strike in 1894 in which many died at the hands of the military and US Marshalls.

He felt it fitting we had 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 to join the meal.

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! (Remember love God – love neighbor!) As I thought about my sermon, it made sense to first comment on what Chris had done – which was 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?

This is 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?

This 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 a sermon ready to put on the table. But Chris added another course to the meal.

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 reflect again, he was inviting me to sit down and let him serve the meal. When any of us do that for each

other (especially 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. 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 each other enjoy his meal! So that his labor of love becomes ours.