When I was a child and we had big family gatherings, there was a respected seating order that was rigidly followed. The adults ate at the BIG table, usually in the dining room. Grandpa had the big chair, the one with the arms and nearest the gravy boat. The teenagers were given their own card table. And the children were relegated to some sort of “junior” table, often out on the back porch, out of sight and maybe even out of mind. I am the youngest sibling and the youngest cousin, so I remember the pecking order quite well. And that I was the last one to work my way up through the ranks.

With each table came certain privileges and responsibilities. The adults were more likely to have matching silverware and china plates, the children paper cups. But when you “moved up” to the next table, you had to meet the expectations of those already there. This was most anticipated when moving from the children to the youth table. Moving up to the adult table was almost a demotion, because then you entered that stranger world of being seen but not heard, but you better not spill anything or do anything else to attract notice. You also had to be polite and paying attention whenever some adult directed some random comment your way. But for all of the drawbacks of reaching the adult table, having a place at the table was also a symbol that you had arrived into the adult world of full personhood.

Having a place at the table is important. Which is why the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Serbs and the Croats, the north Koreans and the south Koreans will argue for months about the size and configuration of the table before entering any sort of negotiations. One of the early battlegrounds of the civil rights movement was a table—the lunch counters in southern dime stores. Having a place at the table is important. And WHICH seat at the table is important, too, for your place at the table has a lot to say about who you are and how the others at the table are receiving you.

Jesus providing room at his table for those who were not welcomed at others’ tables is a major theme in the gospel of Luke. Jesus is constantly enjoying table fellowship with persons considered sinners and outcasts—and continually criticized by the “good people” of his day for doing so. Even when he spends time with the officially acceptable leaders, the Pharisees, he is under the gun. Note that at the beginning of chapter 14, Luke writes, On one occasion when Jesus was going to the home of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

There was always room at Jesus’ table. Especially for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In Jesus’ day, these were not simply the misfortunate or the ill. They were the outcasts of society. Outcasts of “good” society. Jesus’ table fellowship with such outcasts—“sinners” the good people called them—was a provocation for the religious and social establishment. Jesus’ inclusive ways, and his critique of the establishment’s exclusive ways, ultimately led to his crucifixion.

The tension between inclusion and exclusion continued in the early church. On the one hand, the church proclaimed the good news of Jesus, that there is room for ALL in God’s kingdom. On the other hand, the church also asked “Who is worthy to sit at table with Jesus?” The answer of the first century church was the only ones who are worthy to claim a place at our Lord’s table are those who pattern their lives after the life of Jesus. The honored places at our Lord’s table belong to those who give of themselves for others with no thought of being repaid. For as Jesus said, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
I think the tension felt in the early church is with us still. For while we BELIEVE there is room for all in God’s family, and we sincerely welcome any and all who would seek the fellowship of God with us, we also struggle with the implications of welcoming any and all into the household of God. We are much more comfortable being with other folks just like us, than being with those who are UNLIKE us.

In other words, we AFFIRM there is room for all. We just find it hard to PRACTICE.

I remember an older lady in one of my former churches. She always sat on the same pew every Sunday. Without fail. I also remember hearing about a family who visited the church and didn’t know they took HER seat. Until she came in and told them they were in her seat and that they would have to move!

That’s an extreme case, for sure. But it points out the challenge of providing the kind of hospitality to strangers Hebrews wrote about. Those of us who are the “insiders” here have to work at hospitality. At putting our sentiments into action to really invite and welcome others to join us. It takes more than being friendly and receptive (which thankfully we are here at BAPC). Providing hospitality is a lot more than opening the door and saying “come in”. Providing hospitality includes providing a bulletin and a worship service a first time visitor can follow. Providing hospitality includes a building that the lame can enter and rich and poor alike can feel comfortable in. Offering room at the table includes my changing to meet your needs, without expecting that you will do all of the changing to “fit in here”.

Jesus said, “Come and dine with me! You are welcome here! There is room for all with me!” the invitation is offered without qualification and with no “ifs, ands, or buts.” BUT, when we accept that invitation, we accept some responsibilities as well. Just like the child who gets promoted to the adult table and his manners have to improve. For Jesus said the real measure of your faith is not what invitation do you ACCEPT, but what kinds of invitations do you OFFER? Whom do you welcome and extend a place at the table?

A recurring theme in the gospel of Luke is the table fellowship Jesus shared with those whom others judged to be sinful and unworthy recipients of God’s grace. With Jesus there is room at the table for those whom no one else will welcome, much less invite.

Our celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion is a reminder of the table fellowship Jesus shared with sinners. The table fellowship Jesus SHARES with sinners. For here at our Lord’s table, we have a place at the table. We are welcome here! And all who would turn to God in faith are welcome here.

Hearing our Lord’s invitation to us, we have a place at this table. And taking our place, we hear our Lord’s question to us: And who are YOU inviting to join you at my table!? Who do you dare to exclude?

The challenge of the gospel, the challenge of accepting God’s grace, the enduring challenge of Christian growth, simply put, is this: INCLUDE more, EXCLUDE less. Enlarge your circle of friends, make smaller your circle of enemies. Lengthen your guest list. Shorten your never invite list. Greet more and avoid less. Give more, take less. Accept more, expect less in return. Include more, exclude less.

For as Jesus said, when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet [when you celebrate MY holy banquet], invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. For there is room, more than enough room for all.

And you will be bountifully blest! AMEN.
Hebrews 13:1-3
1Let mutual love continue. 2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12He said also to the one who had invited him, “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. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”