

Eating at a restaurant is so commonplace, we probably don't think about it much. But if we were to give it some thought, we might notice there are lots of ways restaurants indicate their intended clientele. Atmosphere – the lighting, decorations, the style of tables, chairs, the presence or absence of booths, the presence or absence of a seating host, wait staff, access for the disabled - is one indication if a restaurant is for families, individuals, couples, or groups of people about the same age. Whether or not alcoholic beverages are served is another indicator. The menu can tell you a lot about a restaurant. If there is a wide or narrow range of choices, if there are options for people with food allergies or on special diets. And of course, there are the prices. How much items on the menu cost will probably say a lot about who eats at the restaurant, and the disparity of income between the customers and the staff.

For many people, eating at a restaurant can be how they feel connected to their community; especially when the staff knows their names and knows what menu items they prefer. When the customer knows a little about the staff, at least enough to have a brief conversation, it also helps feel like a community. They might also enjoy running into friends or neighbors and have a brief chat to catch up on local news or gossip. For some, eating at a restaurant is a rest from the routine of cooking a meal and cleaning up after it. For others, eating at a restaurant is how they celebrate a special occasion. My parents enjoy taking the whole family out to eat for anniversaries and birthdays, usually at a “fancy” restaurant. They also enjoy treating the whole family to lunch at the best local diner in my hometown every Saturday. Of course, in these ongoing days of pandemic, it is now take-out from these favorite restaurants. But even so, this is a family tradition my husband happily embraced and is one of his favorite parts of visiting my parents.

All of these things: the sense of community, the rest from daily routine, celebration and tradition as well as enjoying a delicious meal at a restaurant is usually only possible through financial security and why often you will find people of similar socioeconomic status in certain restaurants. If you have ever inadvertently walked into a restaurant that was intended for people in a different status than you usually hang out with, then you might be more likely to notice those things.

While not literally the same thing as what Jesus described in today's Gospel, where guests at a banquet fought over the best seats in the house, it is similar enough for us to compare. There were no restaurants in Jesus' day. Banquets were a

way to get the neighborhood together, or at least the people someone wanted to share a meal with, to celebrate, or rest, like on the sabbath. Ancient writers like Plutarch described the culture of the time in details that include the expectation that if you were invited to a banquet then you had to host one and invite the person who invited you to theirs. Banquets were, in Plutarch's opinion, troubling because they were opportunities to show off a person's status, the location of where you sat at the table meant something. Like the VIP who gets the best table at a restaurant.

We get a glimpse of this history writers like Plutarch described as problematic in today's Gospel when Jesus attended a banquet hosted by a religious leader. Notice Jesus did not participate in the culturally accepted practice of trying to prove his status by where he sat. Instead, he talked about behaving differently, counter to the culturally accepted behavior of the time. What he said was so counter cultural, some scholars surmise Jesus wasn't suggesting how to behave, Jesus was telling a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. All that talk of taking a lower place at the table can still cause discomfort, and one way to deflect that discomfort is to dismiss Jesus' words as a story. But I am not sure that's what Jesus was doing. I wonder if Jesus was talking about how those who follow him -like you and me- can by our choices, even simple ones like where we choose to sit, reflect God's Kingdom in the world.

The call to live counter to a culture of political power, economic, racial and gender inequality can be intimidating. It takes courage to be different, especially when we all have bills to pay.

But just because it can be intimidating, difficult, and challenging doesn't mean it never happens. If you know where to look, the Kingdom of God is already here.

One place you can find it is in Red Bank, New Jersey. There is a restaurant there that opened in 2011 and serves direct from farm to table locally sourced food, prepared by professionally trained chefs and their staff. The atmosphere is open and welcoming, accessible to people with disabilities, families, couples, and individuals. The menu only lists the meal choices, because at this restaurant there are no prices on the menu. That's right, no prices. This restaurant doesn't take credit or debit cards. It is cash only. At this restaurant your meal is already paid for. No matter who you are, what your job or income is, before you get there, before you order or know what you want; your meal, appetizers, drinks, dessert, and all, has already been paid for.

This restaurant operates on a completely different system and is counter to the culture of status and debt we are too familiar with. The way to pay for a meal at this restaurant is to pay it forward. This means you can pay what you can, paying it

forward with a donation, or volunteer. Volunteers can wait or bus tables, work in the community garden where the vegetables come from, clean, assist in the kitchen, even wash dishes.

You might suspect a restaurant like this didn't or couldn't make. But not only has this restaurant served over 150,000 meals since it opened, it has expanded to two more locations. The most recent opened two years ago at Rutgers University.

The name of this restaurant chain is JBJ Soul Kitchen. They are a community restaurant that claims, "All are welcome at our table where locally sourced ingredients, dignity and respect are always on the menu." Their manifesto reads like what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel: "Where there is love there is plenty".

The JBJ Soul Kitchen started as an idea by a woman named Dorothea Hurley Bongiovi, who pitched the idea to her husband one night while they sat on the couch watching TV. She explained to her husband she was becoming aware of how food insecurity and homelessness is not always visible. And how things they take for granted like eating out when they don't feel like cooking or celebrating a special event can be out of reach for many people, and how she believes everyone regardless of economic status should be able to have a nice dinner out with their family. Where they can sit at nice tables in a nice restaurant, be part of a community, and be able to contribute what they can for the meal.

Her husband loved the idea, and together they created a place like what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Where all are welcome, no one is fighting for the best seat at the table because it is a place where all are loved for who they are, not what they are. Dorothea and her husband volunteer at her restaurant. To this day, her husband, when he isn't at his day job, is usually found at JBJ Soul Kitchen. But you won't find him waiting tables or chatting with guests. That's because he doesn't want to be a distraction and doesn't want to take any attention from anyone else. Dorothea's husband is famous, although some of you may not have heard of him. He is Jon Bon Jovi, the founder and lead singer and songwriter for the Grammy Award winning rock band *Bon Jovi* that is responsible for classic songs like *Living on a Prayer*.

And while he is comfortable on a stage, singing in the spotlight in front of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people, Jon enjoys washing dishes at Soul Kitchen. During the pandemic, Jon and Dorothea and their four children worked at their restaurant just so it could provide to go meals for some of their regular clientele. Later, they created outdoor seating so they could serve people in the comfort that is part of Soul Kitchen's manifesto. I think there is a lot of what Jesus said in today's

Gospel embodied in a famous, wealthy musician washing dishes so others can enjoy a relaxing, delicious, meal feeling like they are a valued part of the community, and no one is an object of charity. That is a little bit of God's Kingdom here on earth. We know it is God's Kingdom because it is a place where everyone is treated with the love of God, with dignity and respect.

The pay it forward model at Soul Kitchen inspired us at Church of the Good Shepherd when we started our coffee shop ministry CrossRoads Cafe. We started CrossRoads Café in response to the question, "how might a church participate in a local economy in a way that looks like Jesus?". Like Soul Kitchen, the success of our coffee shop depends not on getting as many customers as possible by adding to their financial debt, it depends on people believing and living the manifesto where there is love there is plenty by practicing paying it forward.

Today's Gospel and a restaurant chain in New Jersey can remind us God's Kingdom isn't a fable or fantasy that will only come true in the afterlife. It is already here, right now. It is not always easy to see. Sometimes it doesn't look as lovely or joyful as Soul Kitchen. Sometimes the Kingdom of God can make us uncomfortable because it is so contrary to the societal norms we often accept without thought. Like the powerful response offering a small amount of debt forgiveness for students has received. For those living with debt they accrued during their education, this forgiveness feels like a blessed rest, liberation, and respect because it allows them the professional choices education promised. Some are angered because they feel like they are losing something, maybe the place they thought was theirs at the table. Others are relieved because it gives them hope their children will one day have financial security. However you feel about it, I see just how powerful forgiveness is. It's no wonder forgiveness is considered the stuff of resurrection life; it can liberate us from fighting over places of importance to creating a true community where there is plenty, and every seat is a good one because we care for each other and recognize our connections to and dependence on each other. Where no one is unimportant, the dish washer and the waiter and the chef and the customer who wants a meal are all essential members of the beloved community of God, and in fact, are how beloved community happens.

We don't have to be rock stars to find and create Beloved Community. Perhaps today's Gospel can inspire us to look for God's Kingdom and find some courage to choose those counter cultural practices that can reflect God's Kingdom to our neighbors. Whether it's paying it forward at CrossRoads Café, forgiving someone for hurting or disappointing us, washing dishes or help clean up after a family meal so someone else can rest, volunteering to help out here at church or some other organization, because volunteers are harder to come by these days,

intentionally choosing to park farther away from the door of a store, or letting someone in front of you when you are in line, sharing what you can, even practicing thinking about something that upsets you from a different point of view as a way to practice empathy, there are so many ways we can courageously live the ultimate form of pay-it-forward that is resurrection life, through Jesus Christ, who has already paid-it-forward for us all.