Last week I mentioned that there are more stories about Jesus healing people than any other kind of story in the New Testament.

The second largest number of stories about Jesus are about meals, like the story we hear today.

But in case you are wondering, today’s gospel lesson is really not about table manners. It is not a page from Emily Post – for those of you old enough to remember her – or from Miss Manners.

Nor is it a preview for the new Downton Abbey movie, which has a plot focused on a dinner party with the King and Queen of England.

No, none of that.

So what is going on here today?

As the story opens, Jesus has been invited to dinner by a group of Pharisees. The Pharisees in our own day get something of a bad rap as too legalistic, but that is an unfair stereotype promulgated by many modern Christian preachers.

In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were among the many religious parties in Israel during the Roman occupation. The Pharisees were reformers. The dominant party insisted that worship could only take place at the Temple in Jerusalem with animal sacrifices.

But worship exclusively focused on the Temple was becoming increasingly difficult in the Roman occupation, and eventually the Romans would destroy the Temple.

The Pharisees promoted worship in local synagogues where Scripture could be studied, and rabbis could teach and debate. This put the Pharisees in sharp conflict with the Temple priests of Jerusalem.

The Pharisees also had come to a general belief in life after death – their ideas were not that far apart from Jesus.

The Pharisees, not surprisingly, are intrigued by Jesus’s teachings; they even honor him by calling him rabbi.

We are left wondering if Jesus began as a Pharisee. He knew a lot about them. Essentially, Jesus tells the Pharisees, over and over, your reforms don’t go far enough.
In the rabbinical tradition, studying Scripture involves arguing about interpretations, known as midrash. Later Christians come to expect strict doctrines, but in rabbinical tradition, interpretations about Scripture are hotly debated.

Back to our story: One of the Pharisee rabbis invites Jesus to his home for dinner and an evening of midrash debate. Other rabbis are invited, too. Jesus accepts their invitation.

On the way to dinner, Jesus, of course, heals a few people along the road. This is where we pick up the story this morning.

Jesus arrives at the dinner party and immediately notices that people are seated around the table in order of their importance. Truthfully, the guests are following a Middle Eastern table custom of how people are supposed to be seated at the dinner table.

If someone more important than you comes to dinner, you move down a seat. Jesus is well familiar with this custom.

Jesus likely will be given the most important seat to honor him – and there is his opening. The midrash begins here, with the seating chart.

Jesus begins by offering a bit practical advice: When you come to dinner, start at the lowest seat, and wait to be invited to move up to a better seat.

In fact, Jesus isn’t saying anything that the other guests don’t already know. His advice can be found in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs [25:6-7].

But this is not about Middle Eastern dinner etiquette, or even the politics of the dinner table.

Jesus turns this into a teaching moment about the Kingdom of God. By so doing, he turns the seating chart upside down.

In God’s economy, the weak and poor go first. The word in Greek πτοχηουσ [ptochous] that we translate as “poor” has a much broader meaning. It means anyone who is marginalized – and Jesus has a very expansive view of who the marginalized are.

In the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, the marginalized get the best seat at the dinner table, the seat of honor.

And those who have benefitted from greed, violence, brutality and political power machinations will get the worst seat in the Kingdom of God.

But there is even more here.

Take a step back and ask yourself, why are there so many stories about Jesus and meals?

He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He cooks breakfast on a beach for his disciples.

He feeds thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Jesus shares his table with the marginalized in every one of these meals.
As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Jesus feeds the angels.

And ask yourself this: Why has the remembrance of a particular meal on a particular night long become the central locus of Christian worship for the past two thousand years?

It is with a meal, at this table, that we are brought to the very edge of the holy.

We come to this table to remember how Jesus told his disciples on the night before he died that no matter how long the odds, no matter how bleak life looked, he would be with then unto the end of the ages.

And no matter where we sit at the table, everyone is included, everyone loved by God – no one is marginalized at this Table for this meal that lasts for eternity.

When we come here, we experience Christ’s presence with every sense of our being, in our sight, in our touch, and even with our sense of smell and taste as we eat the bread and drink the wine.

This is not some magical alchemy about converting bread and wine into something else.

The question is not how the bread and wine are changed, but how are we changed Sunday after Sunday, year by year, as we share in the bread and wine of this holy meal?

Today, bring all who you are to this. Bring your joys and worries, your triumphs and your wounds, and wrap them into a prayer, and put this prayer into your outstretched hands.

And then exchange this prayer in your hands for the bread of life that never ends. As you do, look around you. We aren’t alone at this Table. When we share in this holy meal, we become one with each other, knit together by the Risen Christ here among us and dwelling within us.

And when you come, don’t worry about who is sitting where.

AMEN