

Year C Proper 22 The Banquet of God Luke 14 1, 7 to 14

Jesus has arrived for a sabbath dinner at the home of a Pharisee. This isn't just any old Pharisee, this is the home of a leader of the Pharisees...someone who would have been very important in the local community.

Luke's casual reference to their dinner together indicates that it wasn't unusual for Jesus to be eating with the Pharisees. We often think of Jesus and the Pharisees as always being at odds and as the Pharisees as grouped with the villains in his story. But Jesus did enjoy debating with them...not all of them wanted to kill him...plus Jesus wanted to teach them, to spread some fertilizer on those not bearing fruit as we learned last week, get them growing again, turned in the right direction toward God and God's ways of living in the world.

The fact that the Pharisees were watching him closely isn't necessarily all bad either. Some wanted to trip him up – to catch him breaking the laws, like healing on the sabbath, but some were genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say.

While the Pharisees were closely watching Jesus, Jesus was taking notice of the usual quiet commotion of taking the correct seat at the meal. Eating together in those days, as Luke constantly points out, was a huge social status issue. Where you sat completely depended on your position in the community and your relationships with the others around you. It was like having to agonize through a wedding banquet seating plan every single time people got together. And it was no joke to these people. It really mattered what seat you got and who you were sitting beside. Where you sat could make or break you socially, politically, and economically. It was incredibly serious business in this society.

Perhaps you think we no longer do this – except at weddings where the bride, the groom, and their most important guests are seated at the “head” table, separated

from the general crowd, and Aunt Betsy is bitterly complaining that she got stuck at the back of the room with crazy cousin Ed and his latest dipstick floozy. She had thought she was the favourite aunt. We do the preferred seating arrangements at a whole lot more than just weddings...any trip to a sporting event or concert venue will tell you this. More money gets you a better seat. The more you're willing to pay, the better the view gets. And corporate sponsors get the royal treatment in private boxes with personal servers. Who you know can land you a seat in one of these sweet seats or perhaps backstage after the concert. But even at casual family dinners or get-togethers with friends, where you sit and who you're sitting beside is sometimes arranged. We joke about sitting at the head of the table but the joke exists because the head of the table is traditionally a place of prestige.

Jesus watches the maneuvering for the most prestigious seats at this particular meal and he sees the perfect opportunity to spread some more fertilizer. Luke writes that Jesus tells them a parable. It isn't much of a parable though – it doesn't sound like a story, it simply sounds like some good advice.

When you get to the meal, he tells them, don't pick the best seat right away...you'll be embarrassed if the host asks you to give it up for someone else. Take the lowest seat, he advises. Then, when the host notices you, he'll move you up to a better seat. Those who are all about the power and prestige of social status, are going to see the value in this advice. What a great way to make us look important, they think. The host is calling attention to our status, moving us up in front of everyone.

Jesus throws a wrench into this interpretation of his words though. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," Jesus tells them. Hmm, this sounds like he is going deeper than just the surface appearance of humility.

In case any of them may still be thinking they need only to show humility on the outside, he throws an even bigger wrench into their social strategizing. Jesus turns to the host, the leader of the Pharisees, who had invited him, and he says for all to hear:

At your next dinner, don't invite people like yourselves...your family or friends or business associates. They'll just pay you back in kind and then the circle will be complete. You didn't really do anything great. You treated them. They treated you. The end. When you give a banquet, Jesus says, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

You can almost hear the host and his guests thinking, "Is this guy nuts?! That is not the way things work. We'd be the talk of the town and NOT in a good way. Eat with outcasts and sinners? Who does he think we are?"

In those days, people with disabilities such as what Jesus lists, were thought to have sinned against God and therefore God was punishing them with their disability. They weren't allowed anywhere near the altar in the synagogue or Temple and so, by default, they also couldn't get anywhere near the leaders of the synagogues and the Temple. They certainly would never be invited to socialize with these leaders. Jesus, throughout Luke's Gospel – and the other Gospels – is working to correct this wrongful way of thinking. These are precisely the people you should be inviting, he says. These are the people who *need* to be invited...not your rich friends and relatives.

Then Jesus throws in the biggest wrench yet. The host and his guests – the "who's who" of their community *must* do this because doing this now matters in the long

run. “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous,” he declares. This really is much deeper than the appearance of humility.

It is no coincidence that Jesus gives this flip-the-values-of-the-world-upside-down teaching at a meal just as it is no coincidence that we gather each Sunday to share a meal with God in God’s kingdom. Throughout the scriptures, the complete arrival of God’s kingdom in all of its fullness – on earth as in heaven – is signalled by a huge meal to which everyone is invited. Isaiah says, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines....[God] will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces,” (Is.25:6, 8). And in the book of God’s Revelation to John we hear of this banquet several times over. The people who come to the feast, we are told, will experience no more pain, no sorrow, no death, no oppression, no injustice, no sickness, nothing broken. God will be fully present to them. This is the radical, restorative, healing hospitality of God’s kingdom and the leader of the Pharisees and all of his guests are challenged to begin that hospitality right now. It could mean political and social ruin for these people but countering oppressive social and economic norms is crucial to the gospel.

The world views those without power – power in the world’s term that is... position, property, and pocketbook – those without *that* kind of power are seen as somehow less than the others who do have that kind of power. This way of thinking creates not only social and economic divides but divides within those classes because human value is assigned according to what we have and what we do. Someone I hold dear has recently recognized the error of this thinking – I know for some of you right now and for some who have already experienced this, you will know exactly what I’m talking about. We live in a society that bases human dignity on our ability

to take care of ourselves. Every retirement home advertisement, every wealth management commercial will tell you...you maintain your dignity by maintaining your independence – living in your own home for as long as possible, or choosing an upscale retirement community when you do need to leave your home. “I don’t want to lose my dignity,” I have heard people say many times over. “I’d rather die first,” they say. Dignity, apparently, in the minds of many, is tied to being able to do such things as feed yourself and walk your own butt to the toilet. So, when you cannot feed herself and you are forced to use a bed pan because you cannot walk, is your dignity gone? Is your self-worth diminished because you are physically diminished? Every compassionate, loving person I know says “No, it is not.” When you look at a once vibrant loved one who cannot do what she or he used to do, that person is no less a person in your eyes. That person still has dignity and self-worth simply because that person exists and because you love that person.

Self-worth does not come from being able to tie your own shoes. It does not come from being able to remember where you are and who the person is who is visiting you. It does not come from anything around us or from what we are able to do. We don’t need to borrow self-esteem from the clothes we wear, the stuff we have, the people we know, or the seat we are given at an important function.

Our dignity comes from being loved and everyone is loved by God. God created us and loves us unconditionally. Jesus points out today this dignity conferred on us through the love of God is possessed by everyone God has created. We are all created from the same clay [said Gregory of Nazianzus, a very wise man who lived about 1800 years ago].

You have most likely heard the popular phrase, “God loves you” or have seen it on a bumper or two perhaps? Well, there is more to God’s love as we learn today. “God

loves us as we are but does not want us to stay as we are.” We are to transform, to grow into the likeness of Christ, Paul tells us. A tall order for sure. We begin, as Jesus shows us today, by living into who we are – children of God and residents of God’s kingdom – feasting together at God’s table, the one Body of Christ in the world, inviting others to feast with us, sharing God’s abundance and love with all in need, especially those not loved by the world, the victims of a broken way of viewing power.

Luke has signaled that the inbreaking divine realm heralded by Jesus will dismantle worldly hierarchies of social status and economic power. Jesus is challenging us today, just as he did those Pharisees long ago, he is challenging us to be on the side of the dismantling, living in God’s kingdom now in the perfection that is meant to be. At the beginning of the bible, we are shown the perfection that we’re heading towards – a world created by God in which we live in equality and love and true peace with everyone, with all things, and with God. The bible ends with an invitation to enter into that perfection when Jesus says, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come.” (Rev.22:17).

In other words, God issues the invitation. We hear the invitation and turn to others with the invitation. And the invitation is for everyone.

The next time you have a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Together, let’s figure out how we can do that.