

*“Are You on the List?”*

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

One sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him. Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “When you are invited by anyone to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, “Give place to this man,” and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, go up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

The table is not only where one may say grace; it is the space where one extends grace. Tables were also the place where a community’s identity could be marked. One’s eating company says something about you and your company.

To the gospel writer Luke, nothing is more serious than a dining table. The Eucharist and revelations of the risen Christ occur there (Luke 24). Jesus promises the Holy Spirit while eating (Acts 1). The table is taken so seriously that Jesus gets into trouble because of his eating buddies. He was known as a friend of tax collectors, publicans, and sinners, because he ate with them. Inviting others to a table could be a sign of affluence or status but could also be a sign of service or a sign of acceptance. Table fellowship meant full acceptance of one another, and the inclusiveness of Jesus revealed by the company that he kept, especially of the socially ostracized.

So, who’s at the table? This is the most obvious part of this parable in Luke. Jesus begins by teaching guest about table manners. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.” Social status was obviously based on the sitting guest and Jesus tells the guest to seek the lower place so that the host may tell them ‘move up higher’. If you humble yourselves, you’ll be exalted and if you exalt yourself, you’ll be humbled. This story about hospitality involves humility, the humility of the guests.

This humble posture is not just for the guests. Jesus tells the hosts to look low as well. “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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...”.

Guess who’s coming to dinner? The strangers and the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who have no social or economic status, those who can’t help us get connected to the influential, those who are not the usual suspects around the table of welcome. In the kingdom of God, we see the inversion of hospitality in which those in the margins are placed front and center at the table to remind us that a community is only as strong as it’s weakest member. Those on the fringes become friends through table fellowship. In the kingdom, hospitality is free and there is no expectation of reciprocity; it is unconditional service at the table. Isn’t that what hospitality is – welcome a stranger? Welcome of difference. Having the other at the table.

**Let’s put it this way!** On one occasion when Jesus was going to a dinner party at the home of a leader of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely. And Jesus was watching them pretty closely too. Jesus was watching and waiting for an opportunity – the chance to turn the tables on them, as he often did. He was waiting for an opening to teach them something about the upside-down, reverse order of God’s kingdom, compared to their own.

Now dinner parties in Jesus, time were far more than events where people got together to share a meal and good company. There was a prescribed etiquette that governed the serving of guest in the home. Meals were ways, these ancient people encoded and enforced the strict social divisions of their times. In other words, who was invited, where and with whom they sat, even what they were fed told the whole story of who was who and who was not. At that time, the guest list for these parties would include folks from different levels of both affluence and influence. Depending on who you were, you were fed either the most expensive and exquisite food in the house or a cheaper more paltry meal. Those with favored status got the best wine; others, more like vinegar to drink. Food and drink were measured out like the host's friendship: in degrees of both quality and quantity.

You could also tell who was at the top of the popularity charts by who got the best seat in the house. This place of honor was, at the inner most point of couches arranged in concentric circles. The more important the guest the closer he sat to the host, who was always in the center. However, should a person of higher status arrive late, social customs permitted the host to tell a guest already seated in the center to move...not ask, but tell: "Give up your seat".

Folks would have had no small amount of anxiety as they prepared for a party, worried about the embarrassing prospect of social disaster if they assumed a privilege of a place that was not ultimately to be theirs.

Jesus, determined to overturn any custom which excluded the most vulnerable, did indeed, watch closely that night. Gently, in a way they might understand and accept, he told the gathered party-goers a parable. "Think about your situation in a new way", "Because your way is not the way the Lord, your God, wants you to greet and treat each other.

"Your table must be open to the last people on this earth you might imagine," the most humble ones, the ones that anyone of standing would never share a meal with...

People who are poor, crippled, lame and blind. People with nothing left to lose. People who are hard to take care of and need a lot of help. People who think differently and act differently than you do. People who have no social currency, no way to repay in kind. People, who for sure, will never be the life of any party.

We might wonder what Jesus, watching the dinner parties of our time and culture might have to say to us – in a way we might understand and accept.

Our parties are somewhat different than the ones to which Jesus went. We would never think to ask one of our guests to make their way to a lower place. Likewise, to our credit, the food that's served at the head table is usually the same for all who gather. We maintain our social divisions by who is **not invited** – rather than how people are treated once they're there. Our parties might be more clearly characterized by who is not welcome at the table – by who is on our "Don't invite" list. We might wonder how Jesus would react to such a list. What would Jesus have to say, about those labeled "Not welcome" by someone in our time, like Pat Robertson, for example? A guy like that has to have a long list of people that would not be invited to his party. We might guess that there would be no atheists or agnostics to be included. No liberals of any political party, no homosexuals, no feminists, no prostitutes, no people with AIDS, no people from New Orleans or Haiti, those places have made deals with the devil and are hated by God, according to Pat. We would also be surprised to see anyone from the Jewish or Muslim faiths at the table.... Nor would we expect to see...

People who believe that global warming is a fact. People who say that no war is Holy. People who think hate crimes are real and should be punished. Nope, not one of those folks would be welcome even on the lowest rung of Pat's social registry. Jesus would have plenty to say to that host, for sure. Don't do it that way, Jesus might urge. "Open up, let down your judgmental guard, share a meal with people who are not like you – and be changed."

But what about people like us? What might Jesus have to say about those labeled "not welcome", someone like us, perhaps like me, like Barry South for example? You know, I have never actually made such a list, but being very honest, I am ashamed to admit how easy the categories of non-invitees came to mind.

My list would include anyone who physically or sexually abuses a woman or a child. My list would include priest and ministers, who think they can say who will go to Heaven and who will go to Hell.

You would not see, for example: People who are know-it-alls. People who believe that war can always be justified. People who say the Holocaust was a hoax. Or people who blame the poor or alcoholics or drug addicts for their lot in life. Nope, none of them would be my choice as dinner companions.

Especially anyone who insist on turning left across three lanes of oncoming traffic during rush hour on Airport Bld. There are others that could go on my list and these I am particularly ashamed to admit: Some homeless people – you know, the ones who scare me, who aggressively accost me for money or stare me down as they cross Airport Blvd against the light. My list might get a bit more personal, at this point, and include people I find hard to forgive:

Like the nameless guy who broke into my daughter's car a few months ago. Or my first serious girlfriend, who broke my heart. And others who have hurt me in the past, whom I cannot seem to let go. All of these people might find their way to my "not welcome" list.

My guess is that most of us could make such a list, if we were to be honest with each other.... A list of people we would rather die than dine with.

And that's the thing...there it is, right there...the thing that Jesus is watching so closely for. The thing that Jesus would for sure, have something to say to all of us about, and probably none too gently, because He would expect us to already understand, and all of us, we Christians who truly want to be like Jesus – to follow his way and to serve Him. I think Jesus would say to us "Not welcome list" makers that we are out of line. We know what Jesus insist on, there can never be a "not welcome" or "don't invite" list – ever. Making such a list, that is, making our judgement of others primary is the last thing were supposed to do, if we really want to follow His lead. That's certainly part of the reversal, the table turning that Jesus would want to do with us today. But I think Jesus is watching us closely and is hoping really hard that we will get an even deeper message. Jesus is asking us, inviting us, praying for us, to put our dislikes and our fears, our prejudice and judgmentally last – and to choose love first. Jesus is asking us to make his way of loving first in our hearts and to use that way as the basis for any and all guest lists we ever make again. Jesus is telling us to give up our seats – our judgement seats and move up higher to a better place.

Jesus invites us down to the cheap seats, to the place where he so often puts himself: in the margins, where first and last, he can always be found. Jesus is encouraging us to spend less time dreaming of dining on the top floor of the Trump Tower and move our sightline to the tailgate table tops in the parking lot. Because when we do that – when we pull ourselves out of the center of our own universe – our perspective can change. What Jesus wants us to do is to make our prescribed etiquette toward others. That code of etiquette begins with: No one, has a right to a place at God's table. The only way anyone gets on that guest list is by grace – the unearned, unmerited, loving kindness of God, given in spite of ourselves. Because God sees every one of us as we truly are and invites us to the table anyway. God sees us as we truly are, all of us are poor and crippled and lame and blind – yet has extended a hand of welcome to all of us through Jesus Christ. God knows that all of us, are people with nothing left to lose... Who are hard to take care of and need a lot of help. Who think and act differently at times, than God wants us to. Who have no social currency, no way to repay God in kind. God knows our unworthiness; our worthiness is not what matters most to God.

Jesus bids us to come up higher than our judgmental natures might allow. He beckons us to sit at the head table with Him, right alongside all the rest of humanity whom God has exalted through Jesus' sacrifice and love.

#### PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So, clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring all people to the knowledge and the love of you and the love and respect of each other, for the honor of your name AMEN.

**BENEDICTION:**

Jesus invites us today to remember that all of us have the potential to be lifted up and exalted by Him who loves and shows us the way. And Jesus tells us to live our lives like we believe it. Go in Peace.