

August 29, 2010

Luke 14:7-14 (New International Version)

⁷When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹²Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The other night, or so I have heard, Donald Trump had a dinner party----a Feast for the Famous! A Banquet for Billionaires!

There was the head table where the Donald sat, and there were 6 other tables, each one farther away than the last. The seats were not assigned, so as people came in they chose their own seats, and of course they wanted to sit as close to Mr. Trump as possible.

Warren Buffet came in, and Bill Gates. Angelina Jolie swept in, and a guy named Hilton and one of the Kardashians. They were followed by Michael Jordan and Phil Jackson. Meryl Streep came in with so did Oprah. All of the guests were movie and tv stars, businessmen and women, superstar athletes, and even some politicians, all of them wealthy and powerful.

They all came in and chose their seats, crowding to see who could get the closest to their host at the head table.

When they had all arrived and were seated, FINALLY Donald Trump came in. He was late because he just couldn't get his hair to look right, but at last he was satisfied and came into the banquet hall.

As he made his way through the room, he stopped and talked to people. He saw that Oprah was sitting much too far from his seat, so he brought her forward and had Warren Buffet go back to where she had been sitting. He also had Angelina Jolie switch seats with Michael Jordan. He asked several other people to change seats as well.

Warren was devastated, and so was Angelina, who really wasn't used to being second to anyone! None of the others who were asked to move down were very happy, either.

Let's face it. It was embarrassing to be asked to move down to a lower table. What would the tabloids say about it?? It was such a scandal! Worse than being fired by the Donald! It was absolutely humiliating!

And a few of them were also very angry! Hadn't they just had a dinner party last month and hadn't Donald sat in the place of honor there?? And THIS is how he repaid them??? By putting them in a lower place? They had never been so insulted in their lives!

And so it was in Jesus' time as well. The Pharisees were proud of their standing in the community, looked up to and respected. It wasn't good when they were asked to give up their places of honor at the dinner table and move farther away from the host. To be moved like that was shameful, something they never wanted to happen.

So on the surface, Jesus' words about taking the lower place seem to be just common sense. You can avoid all kinds of embarrassment and shame if you just sit at the lowest place when you arrive at a banquet. Then if the host moves you up, the honor is yours. And if you are not moved up, at least you don't have to suffer the embarrassment of being asked to move!

But there's something deeper here. Jesus is telling a parable, and parables are always more than they seem on the surface. Jesus is telling this story at a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee.

Pharisees were determined to keep themselves clean, away from the riffraff of the world, obedient to the Law and pure in the sight of God.

Status meant a lot to them. Everything they did, they did to bring honor to themselves and to their families. They were always very careful to avoid bringing shame.

But Jesus was saying that by living this way they were not bringing glory to God, but only trying to bring honor to themselves.

Don't live to bring honor to yourselves, he was saying. Live to bring honor to God. To focus on your own place in the kingdom of God is to risk being moved down to a lower place.

Jesus was warning the Pharisees that by inviting only other people like themselves, that by believing that only people similar to themselves were worthy of coming into the presence of God, that they were risking being shamed and humiliated.

They just might come to find out that others, the poor, the lame, the disabled, and the blind would be sitting closer to God than they were when they came into God's kingdom!

And Jesus was saying something else, something more than a warning to the self-righteous and powerful.

Because other people invite people over for dinner as well, people just like you and me.

Jesus is telling us that beyond the social obligation involved with dinner parties, there's another reason to have them.

Sometimes you want to invite people to dinner because you enjoy their company or you want to get to know them better.

Maybe you enjoy cooking or hosting or maybe it's a special occasion.

What if, instead of having a banquet for socializing or networking or celebrating something,

What if you hosted a huge banquet for the purpose of ---oh, I don't know----maybe---for the purpose of FEEDING people!?

You wouldn't invite the rich and the famous. They can easily afford to provide food for themselves.

Instead, you would invite people who have no way of reciprocating your invitation, at least not right at the moment. You would invite people who are having trouble finding enough to eat ----people who are poor and needy, people who are not welcome in fine restaurants or in Donald Trump's mansion.

Who can you think of that falls into this category---people maybe you don't know personally but that you know about.

Now, you know what I'm saying here, what the challenge is, what Jesus is telling us to do. The joy of feeding the hungry will be enough reward. Knowing that you have made a difference in someone else's life is more than enough reason to host such a meal. You don't need a return invitation.

But this kind of service is not the way of the world. The world teaches us to expect a return on our investments, not to give away our time, our talents, our money and resources for free.

The way of Christ, though, is not about keeping records or balance sheets, about being in the red or the black.

This parable about where you should sit at a banquet is even deeper than this, though. Because it's the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in less than a hundred words.

This is a Kingdom parable. Not as obvious, maybe, as the parables that begin, "the Kingdom of God is like---a woman who puts yeast in the flour until the whole loaf is leavened, or a farmer who scatters seed," or the others that begin "the Kingdom of God is like---"

This one is slightly more subtle, but it's a Kingdom parable nonetheless.

Jesus is illustrating the difference between human values and God's values.

Earlier in the Gospel according to Luke, he quotes Jesus as saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

Matthew says "the poor in spirit" but Luke says simply, "the poor."

The Kingdom of God, Jesus says, belongs to the poor.

Those who excluded now will be rewarded in heaven.

And this parable about the banquet is emphasizing that the first shall be last and doing it in a very pointed way, a way that makes the shame of putting yourself first very understandable, in a context that his listeners could relate to.

And the Good News, the God News, of this parable is this---

God invites us all to come to the table. Donald Trump may fire people and exclude people from his table, and other people may keep people out of their homes, but God does not. The blind, the crippled, the lame were all excluded from entering the Temple, but they are not excluded from the Kingdom of God! We may be excluded from Donald Trump's table, but we are welcomed at God's table!

Those who are last today on earth, will be first at the heavenly banquet.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that he came to preach Good News to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to free those who are oppressed, and proclaim the time of God's favor.

All of us, at different times in our lives, in different ways, are poor or held captive by someone or something, all of us are blind to something even if we're not physically blind. We are oppressed by others or by our own limitations and misunderstandings or by sin or the powers of this world.

There is not a single person in the world who is not in need of the Gospel of Christ. And there is not a single one of us who will be turned away from God's heavenly feast.

God invites every one of us to come and dine on the living bread and drink the living water. We must not resist the invitation out of some kind of false pride.

We must say yes. And come to the table.

Amen.