

“Best Seat in the House”
Luke 14:1,7-14
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12th Sunday after Pentecost

Sometimes I think we Christians walk around with incomplete images of Jesus in our minds; images that we learned from our childhood. Some of the images I was given in my childhood are from the Children’s Living Bible. I left it near the front door if you want to take a look on your way out. In the front cover there is a photo of the bearded Euro-Jesus, dressed in first century Palestinian clothing, walking hand in hand with white middle class children from the 1970s. The one child of color in the photo is furthest from Jesus behind all the white children. White Jesus is smiling, receiving a bouquet of flowers from the blonde, smiling girl. It’s the gentle Jesus. And if we could remove the racism from this image, many would still argue that this gentle Jesus is the Jesus we *should* give to our children while they are young.

Yet sometimes I think we latch onto these gentle images so early that we have a hard time seeing the rest of Jesus. The Jesus who, while gentle with children, is often irritating to adults. The one who overturns tables, calls his own disciples Satan, and castigates religious leaders for their privilege. The one who - this week - acts like a jerk at a dinner party. Last week Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath right in front of an indignant religious leader. This week Jesus escalates. He goes directly to the house of a Pharisee on the Sabbath and heals a man to prove his point. Then he insults the guests by telling them that the kingdom of God is the opposite of their status-driven, ladder-climbing behavior at the dinner. And then he rounds it off by insulting the host by telling him who he should invite to dinner the next time.

Most preachers today will be lifting up Jesus’ words about humility. I expect there will be lots of illustrations about how to be humble, defined mostly as being nice, or pretending that you have less privilege than you actually do, or refraining from wielding power to prove that you have the self-control to abstain from pulling rank when you make that choice. But it’s tough to encourage this kind of humility when Jesus behaves in exactly the opposite fashion. *He’s not nice* in the house of his host – he’s offensive and rude. *He doesn’t pretend that he has less privilege* - he has more than these religious leaders think he deserves. *He doesn’t refrain from wielding power* – he throws it around. I would tell you to be careful when you invite Jesus home for dinner, but it’s not even clear that he was invited at all!!

One possibility is that Jesus is just a hypocrite. A “do as I say, not as I do” kind of person. That would be ironic, since the New Testament often makes the Pharisees out to be the hypocrites, but not totally surprising since the New Testament is historically inaccurate when it comes to the Pharisees themselves. They were not the legalistic moralists the Gospels make them out to be. They are the flexible interpreters, the precursors to modern day rabbinic Judaism, closer to Jesus in their relationship to scripture and tradition than any of the other religious

leaders named in the text. Maybe Luke inadvertently discloses the real Jesus – inconsistent, hypocritical, and rude.

But I think more likely is the very real possibility that the humility that we've come to define as being nice, or meek, or gentle is not what Jesus means when he uses the word. Humility that Jesus is talking about is actual downward mobility. It's recognizing that your money, or your position, or even your correct behavior has no currency in the Kingdom of God. It's recognizing that whatever tables of power we control as the "host" can actually count against us when it comes to the abundant life that God is offering to us; abundant life that is destroyed by our attempts to secure it for ourselves; abundant life that must be received as a child, or as someone in poverty at the mercy of what is given to them, or someone otherwise with less power according to society's notions of who is good enough, or talented enough, or righteous enough to be received into the Kingdom. Humility is not being nice, it's recognizing our complete vulnerability in this life with God.

I used to think that Jesus was mostly *advocating* for that kind of vulnerability and, in a way, he is. These are imperatives. When you are invited, *go* and *sit* at the lowest place. *It is within our power* not to try to take the best seat in the house. It is within our power, not to compare ourselves to others and believe we are better than them. It is within our power to relinquish more of what we have, more of what we hold onto and take less up less space with our words in our relationships, use less resources from the earth, sharing more with others at the tables where we feast.

But I think Jesus is doing more than just advocating that we go against what is usually defined as our self-interest. I think he's pointing out how dangerous it is to take the best seat in the house. How dangerous it is to play the comparative righteousness game. Because there is always someone who is more righteous than you. There is always someone who is more perfect than me. There is always someone who is more deserving than you and me. You can try to play the "more righteous" comparative game if you want to, but often, it doesn't end so well.

At the end of the day, we are all guests, invited together in the presence of God not because we are good, or perfect, or fun or any more special than every other human being God loves. We are invited because God is the host. And God is always looking to include whoever has been left out, excluded, or turned away. Whoever has been judged to be unacceptable, not good enough, not worthy of inclusion.

My friend Ellen Crawford True, a pastor in Pennsylvania, told me about an unusual dinner party that tried to reflect this reality. Hosted by a church in Manhattan the dinner invited well-resourced Manhattanites to pay \$100 apiece to sit at table with homeless people. About 500 people gathered around tables to enjoy roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, red velvet cake, and pumpkin cheese cake. I have questions about how successful that kind of a fundraising event can be when those of us who are not homeless can parade our two hour meal as a kind of heroic venture into uncertainty while the poor go home full for that night but with no real systemic change accomplished or even planned. But the best part of the article that

Ellen shared was the pastor's comment which revealed a kind of Gospel truth. "Both groups," the pastor said mischievously, "tend to be a little high maintenance."¹

The good news is not that the poor are inherently better than the rich. Or that people with disabilities are better than people who do not identify as such. (If anything, Luke's inclusion of people with disabilities betrays a kind of expectation that that particular group is less capable which is its own kind of New Testament blind spot). The good news is that the host of this table is the only one who gets to decide where we sit. The host is the only one who gets to issue the invitations. And this host tends to invite people who don't tend to be invited because of all the ways we invent to judge, divide, discriminate, exclude. People who don't see themselves as hosts at all. People who know that they are always guests at God's table, fed by food they did not cause to grow, by grapes they did not call forth into being, by love they did not bring from their imagination into the world.

My friend Ellen tells me at her church the communion table is literally immovable. It is bolted to the floor. It's not as mystery-laden as it sounds. It's something about needing to hide the air conditioning return that just has to be right there in the floor. But Ellen makes the case that this practical necessity reflects a theological reality for each of us. Try as we might, we cannot move the table out of the center of the Gospel. We cannot move the table out of the center of our faith. "Whether debating Pharisees or sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners," she writes, "or breaking bread in the upper room before his arrest, Jesus makes a point of sitting at table with people of all kinds. He seeks them out; he invites them in; he talks to them; he builds a relationship with them; and he gives them bread, knowing all the while that these guests cannot return his invitation. Each time we gather here, I am reminded that I'm not the host; Jesus is. I, too, am on that unwelcome and unexpected guest list. . . I'm the one who can never fully repay my host no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try."²

I thought about Ellen's words this week in relationship to our own table. I have jokingly referred to the walk from the preacher's seat on the lectern side to the pulpit on this side as "the walk of shame." It's the exposed walk when the preacher feels the weight of the eyes of the congregation, of expectation - the vulnerability that comes from knowing that you have to stand before the congregation and share the collision between the text and the way you see the experience of life that week. I never dreamed that I would ever experience that vulnerability so literally and painfully as I feel it this morning. And yet, at the center of that "walk of shame" is the table - I can't avoid it. No preacher can. It forces me to alter my path, to get from here to there. That table - where the best seats in the house do not belong to those who appear to be the most perfect. That table where sinners and tax collectors, and Pharisees and lawyers, people who are poor and preachers, and everybody who knows they are much less than perfect, less than righteous, less than whole finds a place.

¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2853649/NY-dinner-puts->

² From "Come to the Table," Sermon preached by Ellen Crawford True on September 1, 2013.