

“Jesus’ Dinner Party: You’re Invited!”  
Luke 14:1, 7-14  
Sunday, August 28, 2016  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

That great comedian, Lily Tomlin, once said, “The trouble with the rat-race is that even if you win, you're still a rat.”

In verse 11, Jesus puts it this way: “...all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” At Jesus’ table the first are last and the last are first.

**I. Biblical context.**

The table represents God’s kingdom -- the eternal heavenly banquet and the joy of his earthly kingdom in which we can all participate if we so choose. Meals and the table are emphasized in Luke more so than in any of the other gospels.

From v. 1 we note that Jesus is invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees; a very high-up, respected individual. The lectionary skips over verses 2 thru 6, which give a picture of the power-struggle between the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus, being Lord of the Sabbath, decides it’s in keeping with his compassionate nature to heal a sick man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, wanting to maintain their high-up, respected positions, argue that Jesus ought not to be healing on the Sabbath. They are “watching him closely,” to see how he behaves at the Sabbath meal.

One scholar comments that, “These ‘watching’ people hoped that they could discredit Jesus so that his influence would falter. They watched, hoping that he might say the wrong word like politicians, whose careless words are used against them. They watched, perhaps thinking

they could catch him in a compromising situation. Their behavior was like General Motors hiring private investigators to search through the private life of Ralph Nader. Or perhaps they wanted to find some glaring insincerity so that people might begin to wonder if he really believed and followed his own message. A noted TV religious personality is reported to have purchased a \$449,000 home in addition to a new Mercedes-Benz and a Rolls-Royce. When asked about this discrepancy of message and life-style, he said that he and his wife ‘just had to have a little place of our own.’ Jesus’ watchers wanted to uncover something like that; with it they could deflate the disturbing attractions of this prophet from Nazareth,” (Wallace H. Kirby).

Of course, we can immediately see parallels with the current presidential race. Trump digging up dirt on Hillary and vice versa. The media living off the dirt that is dug up.

Difference is, in our gospel reading -- Jesus is who he is. The “watchers” – the religious leaders – they may think they are digging up dirt on Jesus. But the truth is quite the opposite.

In this context of being watched and negatively evaluated, Jesus gives his teaching about proper behavior at a wedding banquet. In the first part of the teaching, Jesus directs his instruction to the guests at the banquet.

## **II. To the guests: disgraced or honored? (vv. 7-11)**

Jesus’ teaching to the guests makes me cringe. I get this feeling – this fear of impending public humiliation. Can you picture it? You show up at the heavenly banquet and choose a seat somewhere near the middle. Not the head table, of course; but you don’t want a seat near the kitchen, either. Somewhere in the middle seems about right.

Then Jesus walks up and says, “Um, excuse me, but you’re going to have to move. Standing room only. At the back. This seat’s reserved for Gandhi.”

That’s the kind of mental image this scripture brings up for me.

I think most of us in this room would not be the type to put ourselves forward in terms of intentionally taking a seat of honor that was not intended for us. But we could, inadvertently, assume that we have a better seat reserved for us than is actually the case.

The Pharisee in our story is like that. He invites Jesus to his Sabbath meal. Kind of like inviting the visiting preacher out for Sunday brunch. You, being the one doing the inviting, automatically assume the best place at the table, with Jesus sitting right next to you.

Jesus, however, may be more interested in the guy or the gal bringing the mimosas or tending to the omelette bar.

Or, he might invite someone else to sit next to him, and ask you to move on down the table. He may be more interested in a person you find especially distasteful or inappropriate for the company of the visiting preacher.

Jesus humbled himself, as it says in Philippians 2:5-11:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

In today's gospel reading Jesus paints a picture of the heavenly banquet. In it the humble will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

There's such a danger in this teaching. The already-humble may hear it as an admonition to humble themselves even further. Perhaps too far. If you're already working in the kitchen,

Jesus is not instructing you to move out to the trash bins behind the kitchen. But some of us go there at times, feeling as if we're not good enough even to eat the leftover scraps out of the trash.

On the other hand, the powerful and respected may, as usual, consider themselves to be exempt from Jesus' teaching on proper humility at a banquet. After all, they provide the food for the feast! They provide the house for the banquet to be held in! They graciously invite Jesus to be a guest at the banquet! Certainly they are not the ones Jesus is correcting.

### **III. To the host: invite the poor. (vv. 12-14)**

This is when Jesus turns to the second part of his teaching, the teaching directed at the host of the party.

Jesus likely looks around and notices that there are not a lot of poor people at this Sabbath dinner party. In fact, no poor people have been invited.

Jesus invites the poor to his Table. He invites those who are rejected by polite society. He instructs the leader of the Pharisees and his fancy friends to do the same.

This does not necessarily mean that we are never to invite our friends to dinner. The passage simply reminds us that at Jesus' table the poor are welcomed. The outcast get seats of honor. The rejected and the forgotten are seated next to Jesus himself. Jesus suggests that if we invite the poor and the lost and the forgotten we will be blessed. He suggests that we give it a try. He suggests that we open our eyes and our minds and our hearts, that we see the world through his eyes rather than through the world's eyes. In the world's eyes, successful, wealthy, beautiful people are the preferred guests. In Jesus' eyes, forgotten, poor, broken people get preferred seating.

Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember

that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts.”

If we are faithful in love for one another and for a lost and hurting world, we no longer have to worry about being successful, however success is defined. We can leave issues of success in God’s hands.

It is interesting to return for a moment to v. 1. We remember that Jesus is invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees; a very high-up, respected individual. We can now see that the teaching Jesus gives about how the guests ought to behave is also a teaching for the host – that he ought not to consider himself higher than others in God’s kingdom. He may be highly respected in society, enough to have the place of highest honor at his own Sabbath meal, with his honored guest, Jesus, right next to him, for show. But in God’s kingdom he may be asked to move to the least respected seat in the house. Jesus is in charge of the seating arrangements.

### **Closing**

Then again, I suspect there are no “honored seats” and “lowest seats” at Jesus’ banquet. He wants you to know that you are an honored guest at his banquet. He invites you to join him at his table.

W. Robert McClelland says it well in his book, Fire in the Hole. He writes:

“During the dark days of slavery in this country, Blacks worked in the cotton fields stripped of their dignity, naked to the waist, and barefoot in the dirt. But the human spirit refuses to be broken. From deep within the Black psyche rose that rebellion spawned by Christian faith and expressed in the music of the soul; the Negro spirituals. In them the note of human dignity is never far from the praise of God.

“I got shoes, you got shoes, All of God's chillun got shoes. When I get to heav'n, gonna put on my shoes. I'm gonna walk all over God's heav'n.

“What does it mean to sit in the seats of honor at the kingdom table? It means dropping a barefooted slave mentality! It means putting on our heavenly shoes, and walking all over God's heaven and God's good earth, as well. To be an honored guest at the feast of the Lord is to value oneself ultimately.”

Jesus invites you to His dinner party. He provides the food and drink. Jesus welcomes you into His kingdom. He provides the grace, the love, the forgiveness, the joy, the new life, the possibilities, the surprises...and the shoes... Jesus has a place of honor waiting for you. It's got your name on it.

Amen.