

### Luke 14:1, 7-14, NRSVue

14 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. <sup>8</sup> “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, <sup>9</sup> and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. <sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. <sup>11</sup> For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

<sup>12</sup> He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

#### *A Place at the Table*

I grew up in a family that liked to get together and talk. My dad likes to tell the story that, when he first met my mom’s family, my aunt (who is not a blood relative) pulled him aside and told him, “Just so you know, everyone talks at the *same* time in this family.” I like to say that I’m from a family of yappers. And being from a family full of people who like to talk, I’ve learned how to carry three different conversations at once. Because people talk so much, I’ve also learned how to let others talk, and how to listen and observe them.

I say all this to say that, I love dinner parties. I admit it.

It’s fun to go somewhere with people, some I know, and some I don’t, enjoy something to drink and something to eat, and simply have a good time making new friends. I also like to lightheartedly debate, sometimes (in good faith!) with people at these parties, and I appreciate, usually, coming away from these events knowing a bit more about myself and those who I’ve spent the evening speaking with. My favorite part of these events is, though, the networking opportunities that arise. I think that at least part of the reason why I became a pastor is because I get to talk so much. It seems that, like me, Jesus is no stranger to the dinner party scene. He, too, seems to enjoy good food and good conversation at these events, and moreover, the opportunity to observe. And he notices some things that are rather interesting about the people that he’s dining with, and how they behave at dinner. What’s more, he notices how what they do reflects, or rather, is inverted by, the kingdom of God. Let’s talk about that.

... Would you please pray with me? ...

For the third time in Luke, Jesus is dining in the house of a Pharisee.<sup>1</sup> Between these instances, and the instances of him dining with tax collectors, the poor, the infirm, and his own disciples, it would seem that Jesus likes to eat, fellowship, and generally party with others. I guess we have that in common, he and I. Why he was invited on this particular occasion, though, we don't really know. His host may have been interested in what he had to say, inviting him in good faith. Or, he might have been preparing for a debate, hoping to catch Jesus in a trap.

I realize that, with all the discussion that Jesus has had with the Pharisees these past few weeks, I've not done a very good job of explaining who and what a Pharisee was. So let me give you a brief introduction to them. The Pharisees were a small fraction of the Jewish population, and they're generally understood as the forerunners of the rabbis in Judaism today, and the Gospels portray them as some of Jesus's primary rivals in his ministry. They are often depicted asking trick questions of Jesus, or arguing with him, or just stirring up the crowds around him. However, we don't really know what kind of group they were and what role they played in regular Jewish life: were they a political party, a religious sect, a scholarly class, or some combination? Biblical scholars aren't sure.<sup>2</sup> But they were, at least as they're portrayed in the Bible, some of the primary interpreters of Jewish law. One could say that they were kind of a big deal. On average, Pharisees likely had access to quite a bit of money.

It's difficult to say much more than that. I do ask that you pardon any conjecture or lack of knowledge on my part. I hope that clears a bit up around this group that we've been speaking about. I say this all to you now, though, to underscore the fact that these people at this dinner are wealthy. The folks at this dinner party are well-to-do, higher up on the social ladder than others in their society.

At any rate, in between the verses that we've read, Jesus has healed a man with a condition known as edema, also known as dropsy. We don't know if he was invited as a guest, or if he entered when the host opened his home to the needy. If it's the latter, then the Pharisee that's hosting Jesus is already putting in practice Jesus's teaching to invite "the crippled (and) the lame." If this is the case, then this is a fine illustration of Jesus's point. Alternatively, though, the man with edema may have been there to entertain: people who were crippled, lame, and blind were often brought in by a host for the after-dinner entertainment. Mocking and deriding people with disabilities, who were almost certainly poor, was a way for able-bodied, typically wealthy, folks at dinner parties to feel a sense of assurance in their social superiority.

Suddenly, Jesus' teachings gain context in immediate, intimate ways. Instead of laughing at this man, Jesus heals him. In this sense, just like the hobbled-over woman from Luke 13 (which we heard about last Sunday), Jesus sets this man free: free from the illness that makes him an outcast. If we turn around the perspective, then this ill man also represents something about the Pharisees. Perhaps they too have an illness: not a buildup of fluid, but an excess of

---

<sup>1</sup> See Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-54.

<sup>2</sup> *Bible Odyssey*, "Pharisees," <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/pharisees/>.

greed. Perhaps the man's edema is a visual symbol of the illness that makes a person want more and more honor, status, and wealth. Such an illness, as I'm sure we all can attest, is insatiable. Jesus, however, sets us free. He shows us how, and why, with a parable.

After he heals the man, Jesus also asks a familiar question: is it right to heal on the Sabbath?<sup>3</sup> Now, I won't go into that again this morning. But throughout the whole Gospel of Luke, he's been touring Palestine, teaching and preaching and healing and eating, defending and justifying his actions to people who criticize him, and he's been largely successful in proving his point in his mission. Now, Jesus is at another a dinner. He is being watched and observed, likely critically so. And when he heals the man on the Sabbath, the other guests at the dinner don't know how to respond to this. Perhaps they simply move on to other conversation topics: the text transitions directly into Jesus noticing how they've seated themselves.

I do find it very interesting that Jesus is described as a people-watcher in this story. That's another thing that we have in common: another of my favorite parts of going to a party is standing along the wall, with a plate of food in my hand, and just watching what the people do, how they're interacting with one another, and so on. I've gone on a few dates in my life, actually, where the main activity we were doing was people-watching in a Walmart or some other big store. (Hey, when you're a poor 16-year-old, you have to make your own fun.) But notice this: not only are the Pharisees that he is eating with watching him closely, as we read in the very first verse of this morning's story, but he is also watching others. Both parties are paying attention to each other.

Jesus notices how, on this occasion, the guests are seated by social status. This was actually common in Greco-Roman society; honor and shame were crucial players in one's social status. Everyone wanted to be honored, and nobody wanted to be dishonored, and things that were honorable were typically those that made you look powerful, stoic, and generally in control of yourself and others. This actually fueled so many aspects of Greco-Roman culture, from the structure of the family to the treatment of foreigners and foreign nations. In other words, quite literally, honor and shame influenced everything, from the most internal to the most external affairs of society.

The rank of everyone at this table, due to the seating arrangements of the time, is obvious to any who are looking. As we've established so far, Jesus is one of those people who looks and notices. If your place at the table dictates your rank, then being asked to move for a more honored guest would be humiliating and disgraceful. Far better, Jesus says, to take the lowest place, and be honored in being moved to a higher place. "For," Christ says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Such a reversal of status is a very common theme throughout the Gospel of Luke. It's a call to justice, echoing through Jesus's commandments for the poor to be uplifted and the rich humble. Status reversal, though, doesn't in and of itself result in any kind of justice or equity. We would be wise to consider whom Jesus is addressing: at this dinner, he speaks to guests of a prominent Pharisee who are socially well-positioned. Jesus does not call the marginalized, poor

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Luke 6:9; Mark 3:4.

and oft-overlooked servants at the party to be humble. These people, one might say, can literally afford to take a humble place and elevate others. Every one of us is called in these verses to live humbly, but this can look differently from person to person. Jesus isn't simply telling us some good life advice, or teaching us how to climb the social ladder; he's inviting us to live in an entirely different world within this world: the kingdom of God.

If that weren't subversive enough, Jesus continues to subvert the norms of his times. He goes on to say to his host, "the one who had invited him," that when you plan a meal, you shouldn't invite your friends, siblings, or rich neighbors. (The construction in verse 12, "do not invite your friends," Greek could actually be more closely translated as a prescriptive command, such as, "*stop* inviting your friends."<sup>4</sup>) Now listen, I'll level with you. I think in some way, we all like to party. I think it's clear that Jesus was no exception. Of course, he isn't saying that we need to stop inviting people we care about to our own events. But do you remember the shame and honor culture that I mentioned? It was incredibly common in Greco-Roman society to host a party and invite people who could elevate your social status. This would include your friends, family, and of course, your rich neighbors, who would then be expected to reciprocate such a deed. These were, ultimately, networking opportunities. But, according to Jesus, this is the wrong guest list. At least, it's too narrow of one.

Jesus advises his host, a leader among the Pharisees, that his guest list should not be limited to those within and above his own class. Rather, he should invite the marginalized, the dis-eased and physically challenged, and those who are socially and economically humbled: in other words, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind;<sup>5</sup> the ones whom society overlooks or looks down on. Jesus says here that these are the kinds of folks we should intentionally embrace.

So I ask you this: who has a place at our tables? When we invite guests to dine with us, either literally in our homes, or figuratively, when we determine what kind of world we'd like to live in, who has a voice? Jesus says in Luke that our social status or financial resources should not establish our significance in the eyes of others or in our own minds. But how are we deciding on our guest lists? What things are we paying attention to when we determine who to listen to? How might the Spirit be prompting us, as a community, to expand our guest lists?

Let us remember that we are all at the same table: the table of God. Theologian Mitzi J. Smith writes, "If the Most High God and his son visits, communes with, and uplifts the lowliest in society, surely the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples should do the same."<sup>6</sup> Are we also disciples of Jesus? Is this not at least part of the work that we are called to do in Christ's name, as Christ's Community? What happens when we seek to elevate God, rather than ourselves? What happens when we see God in the least of these? And, the ultimate question: how do we do that?

Instead of thinking in terms of reciprocity – the measure of the world – Jesus proposes instead the measure of the kingdom: The Gospel, the Good News, is proclaimed to the outcast,

---

<sup>4</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke*, Sacra Pagina series, v. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 14:13

<sup>6</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, Commentary on Luke 14:1, 7-14, for *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-luke-1.41-7-14-4>.

the blind, the lame, and poor. Jesus doesn't warn us about the *proper way* to be exalted. Rather, he warns against the frame of mind that seeks exaltation *at all*. We must remember that, for as good as we may feel about ourselves, and for as much as we want to emphasize that this is *us* doing good things, God is the one who exalts, and God is the one who humbles. God's blessing is a gift for the one who trusts in God's Word. Blessed are those who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, and who endure hatred, exclusion, insult and defamation on Jesus' account.<sup>7</sup> His disciples, then, will be blessed when they honor and serve those in need, remaining alert for Christ's return as they continue in the work of the Gospel. This is the good news that Christ shares with us: he is aligned with those who are in need, and he works with, by and through those who work for righteousness.

So Christ, in this dinner party, calls for us to seek justice first. He calls for us to uplift the least of these, so that they might have a place at our tables. In doing so, we all have a place at God's table.

I must admit, it feels a bit hollow to speak about reciprocity, or justice, or uplifting the least of these, in light of recent events. It's hard to remember to seek justice when injustice is so rampant. It's hard to have hope in the world, in making it a better place, when we see tragedies like the one on Wednesday in Minneapolis. It's hard for me, I'll admit, to always trust that God is moving among the hearts of those who commit such atrocities, or even that God is still present with those who weep. It's easy to feel hopeless when faced with death. But, then I remember what Christ says in our scripture.

Jesus says in the end that that the goal is not to be repaid by others, because we will ultimately be "repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." In short, we can trust the abundance of God. We can trust in the righteousness that God brings in Christ. We must believe that, despite any hardships, Jesus is aligned with those who weep. The Spirit is upon those who have been harmed. And our God, above all, is the God of the least. Jesus reminds us through this morning's scripture that the Spirit of God was there, and remains there, with those who were killed and injured. He reminds us that all of us have a place at the table, no matter what we've gone through in this life. And Christ, after all, is on the side of hope: hope for a better world, hope for the coming kingdom of God, and hope for reconciliation among all peoples. In the midst of all of the hurt, 2000 years ago and today, Christ is still advocating for peace. As the body of Christ, let us do the same.

No one who lives in Jesus, like Jesus, or alongside Jesus, will miss a seat at the table. This includes the ones that Jesus advocates for: the children, the teachers, the families who have been touched by violence and strife this week and every day. As we prepare our own tables, and as we prepare to dine at the table with Christ, we must remember that we are all at the same table. We are all invited to dine with Christ. God gives each of us a voice, and the Spirit empowers us to use that voice. Let us use it for good. Let us invite others to our table, and in so doing, remember where God is. Let us be moved by the Spirit to further God's kingdom.

Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:20-23.

Charge & Blessing: Let us work creatively and persistently, to promote not ourselves, but the extravagant grace of God. Let us invite all to the table, to join in the banquet of fellowship, justice, and peace, in Christ's name. And as we do, may God's face continue to shine upon you, may God continue to smile upon you, and may God bless and keep you, for all of your days. Amen.