

## ***"When You Invite Jesus..."***

Time after Pentecost - Lectionary 22  
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Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Luke opens the fourteenth chapter by telling us that Jesus "was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath," and that "they were watching him closely." I'm glad our Gospel begins with this verse, because it sets the table, pun intended, for what happens at the dinner party Luke describes. But before we get to what happens when you invite Jesus to dinner among Pharisees, we need to take note of four important details all condensed in this one verse.

First, notice that Jesus is a guest at a dinner party. We'll talk about some specifics about this particular party in a moment, but let's acknowledge the importance early on attached to what happens when folks gather around a table. Table talk often provides a forum for friends and families to catch-up on the events in the lives of one another. At the dinner table, we often teach our children manners and social customs. We hear stories that bind us together as immediate families or even extended families, like the church. It is a fact that conversation around the table has a long history laden with religious, social and psychological significance.

Second, notice that the meal takes place at the home of a Pharisee. Phariseeism began as a religious movement among Jews living outside of Palestine. As sojourners in foreign lands the Hebrew people needed a way to maintain their religious identity. They could not regularly attend worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and they rubbed elbows daily with those who did not know their God. So, they had to find a way to keep themselves together as the Chosen People of God. The Pharisee response to the threat of cultural dilution was to say, "We will maintain our Jewish identity by keeping Torah, the Hebrew Law. Even when we live among non-believers, we will keep our religion and ourselves pure. By faithfulness to the Torah," the observant Jew could say, "I know who I am and the world knows who we are. We are the ones who keep God's Law."

Third, this dinner part takes place on the Sabbath. Keeping this holy day of rest and worship was central to Jewish differentiation from the surrounding Roman culture. Jewish law developed some 270 different regulations for keeping the Sabbath, which, to the Pharisees, were essential. Jewish identity as the chosen people of God was bound up in keeping the Sabbath rules. Jesus got in trouble over this issue on more than one occasion, if you remember last week's Gospel and sermon.

Finally, Luke tells us that the Pharisees kept a suspicious eye on Jesus at this dinner party. They had already seen him break too many Sabbath laws to be totally at ease with him. If Jesus continued to degrade the purity of their religious traditions and practices, well, something would have to be done. These Pharisees were the religious elite, and they took their job very, very seriously.

Which brings us nicely to the specifics of this particular occasion. Now, we don't know that much based on what scripture tells us, but we can make some pretty good guesses.

This is not some informal gathering among friends over wine and cheese. This party is being hosted by a leader of the Pharisees, and you had to have an invitation to attend. This is the type of gathering that will be featured in next week's society pages with pictures showing the fortunate attendees holding glasses of champagne and smiling their best camera smiles. They would be the *crème de la crème* of the town. An invitation to this shindig would catapult you to the top of the social ladder.

Jesus, of course, does not usually share a foothold on the top rung of such a ladder. He has probably been invited because he has been in the news so much lately, and the Pharisees wanted to observe him up close.

The dining room, we can just imagine, was magnificent. The crystal chandelier came from Paris, you know. The buffet was opulent: caviar, smoked salmon, and, sterling silver serving platters.

Deciding the seating arrangements at such a swarve probably took hours. The dinner party consultant hired by the hostess had to be certain the right people got seated at the right places. Where you sat at table in Jesus' era carried a huge social value. In spite of that, Jesus notices that when he thought no one was watching, young Joe Cohen moved his nametag from near the bottom of the table to up near the top.

The butler signals "Dinner is served." The rabbi offers a much too long-winded invocation. People find their places and the meal begins. Most of the polite table talk concerns the new director of the symphony, the recently announced sale of the Jerusalem Mall to a firm from Antioch, and how the neighborhood took a nose dive when the Roman governor bought a house down the street.

But they've invited Jesus into the mix, and, noticing how the guests chose the places of honor, he launches into one of his fabled parables. When you invite Jesus, you get stories – amusing to some; annoying to others. He talks about how embarrassing it is to take one of the preferred seats at the table only to have a more important person come along and "bump" you into a less prestigious seating. Joe Cohen, the young man Jesus saw switching name tags before the dinner started, drops his eyes and looks like a kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

As if that statement isn't enough to rile his critics, Jesus immediately challenges the notion about who, in fact, should actually be invited to a dinner party in the first place. "Don't just invite your relatives, business associates, and rich friends," he tells them. All of those folks will turn around and invite you to their next party. Instead of calculated reciprocity, which is what that sort of social custom is, Jesus says you should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. "And you will be blessed," he says, "because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." We can just imagine the hostess of the party turning to her husband and saying in a hiss, "I told you when you invite Jesus you invite trouble, but would you listen to me?"

You've probably all figured out by now that this story in Luke is not about table manners or about proper social decorum, nor about seating arrangements at a dinner. It is really about "who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God," as the very next verse in this story asks, a verse left out of our Gospel reading today.

The Hebrew people of Jesus' time were not unlike people of every generation. They wanted to know, "What gives my life meaning?" The Pharisees answered that question by saying, "Our lives have meaning because God has a covenant with us. We are the chosen people of God. We stay faithful to God by the careful observance of the Law. When we keep the law, God is pleased with us and the world knows we are His people."

Jesus answered the question differently. He took his relationship with the Father very seriously, of course, but he did not feel that we have to keep every jot and tittle of the law each and every day. Jesus also understood that Jews had a very special relationship with God; they were the people God chose to be a light to the nations. However, Jesus expands on that to insist that God has a special relationship with all of his creation. The Jews, Jesus would remind them from the Abrahamic Covenant, were blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. We are all in the same family – God's family. And our identity, our "worth-whileness," comes from the fact that we are God's children. We keep faith with this family of God, not by observing the law, but by loving one another. For Jesus to be faithful to God, he had to set a higher priority on healing the bent over woman we discussed last week than he put in keeping the Sabbath or maintaining a dignified ethos at a dinner party.

You see, Jesus' instructions about who is to be invited are not about proper social etiquette. It is a picture of the Kingdom of God where even the lame and blind and poor have an honored spot, not because of their social worth, but because of God's love for the least, the last, the little, and the lost. And in the eyes of God, it is those who show compassion to such as these that display the heart of Jesus. And . . . and, who among us can't count ourselves among the least, the last, the little and the lost in the eyes of God?

When you invite Jesus, the table is prepared for all God's children regardless of social status, regardless of race, creed, age, gender, sexual orientation, or any distinction you wish. We are free from the need to jockey for position, Christ proclaims, because in the Kingdom of God our honor and status have already been assured. And now, we are free to serve others.

I found a modern historical example of this in a rather strange place. Does the date July 3, 1988 ring any bells? It was on that date that an American navy cruiser, thinking itself to be under attack, by an Iranian F-14, gunned down an Iranian airliner. Two hundred ninety passengers died. Polls revealed that most Americans were against paying any compensation to the victim's families. The Iranian hostage crisis was still too fresh in many minds. In spite of this, President Ronald Reagan, not known particularly as a "bleeding heart liberal," approved the compensation. Afterward, he was asked by reporters if such payment would send the wrong message to the Iranians. His reply was extraordinary. He said, "I don't ever find compassion a bad precedent."

Not even, according to Jesus, when it comes to the guest list at the banquet in the Kingdom.

Amen.

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