

Today’s lesson is read from Luke 14:1, 7-14

Hear the words from Luke:

Read Luke 14:1, 7-14

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

Jesus wasn't known for his politeness around the dinner table. Though the Gospels record him receiving and accepting many dinner invitations during his years of ministry, those mealtime scenes usually ended in some around the table feeling frustrated, offended, or guilty. Once, a woman with a suspicious reputation brushed his feet under the table. More than once, he interrupted a meal to heal sick people on the Sabbath. Often, he ate with dirty hands, shared a table with riff-raff, and drank more than his enemies considered respectable. Worst of all — he said things. Blunt, embarrassing things no one cared to hear. (This is why I sometimes smile when I hear people say, “It doesn’t matter if Jesus was holy or not. All that matters is that he was such a nice guy.” But was Jesus always a “nice guy”? If you read the Gospels again, you may find that he wasn’t always so polite.)

Think back to two Sunday’s ago and what Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke chapter 12, “Do you think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth?” he asks the crowd of followers. “No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.”

Last Sunday in Luke chapter 13, Jesus disrupts the regular Sabbath service in the synagogue, stops his sermon, and places the crippled woman at the center of everyone’s attention. The leader and others in the synagogue protest against Jesus’s healing of the woman and are upset at Jesus for messing with tradition. Again, if “tender Jesus, meek and mild” is what we prefer, then today’s gospel reading is not for us. Jesus the disturber of peace. Jesus the disrupter of tradition.

Today’s reading from Luke 14 describes another not-so-nice scene. Jesus is invited for a Sabbath meal by a leader of the Pharisees. Arriving early, he sits and watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honor around the table. If I’m imagining the scene correctly, it almost reminds me of the Three Stooges – they push and shove each other, building themselves up with false pride and making themselves seem impressive while still fighting for prestigious spots near the host.

After observing their drama for a while, Jesus calls them out with a parable. Knowing full well the social rules of his day, he shuns them and calls for a revolution. Not a revolution in battle with arms, but a revolution in table etiquette with honor. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor," he encourages his fellow guests. "Go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.'" "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

If that isn't disturbing the peaceful wedding or disrupting the tradition enough, Jesus then turns to his host and continues: "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the

poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”

I don’t know about how ya’lls wedding went, but what Jesus is doing is the equivalent to placing himself at the center of an important celebration and going off on a tangent which is exactly what happened to Kendall and I at our wedding.

During the toasting part of the reception the MC/DJ invited each person who was pre-approved to give a toast to come forward and give his or her speech. First it was Kendall’s sister, then it was my sister, then Kendall’s father, then one of my groomsmen, and that was it. No one else was on the list to speak. But, out of left field comes Ms. Becky (a mother of one of Kendall’s high school friends) who grabs the microphone and goes off on a crazy tangent of how great Kendall is with her grandson and how I’m so lucky (which I am). However, while she is on her unwanted rant I can tell people are uncomfortable and smiling a polite nervous smile. This moment is what comes to my mind in the reading. Jesus does the very same thing (but what Jesus does and says is always truthful and beneficial).

Luke doesn't tell us how Jesus's listeners reacted. I don't know if they laughed in discomfort, shook their heads in disbelief, questioned Jesus's sanity, argued back, or followed his advice. All I know is how I react as I read and re-read this story. I feel an uncomfortable combination of surprise, skepticism, and fear. As in: Really? Is Jesus serious? Does he have any idea what he's asking?

It appears he does. Every once in a while, just as I'm growing comfortable with my faith, a story like this one comes along to mess with my complacency. Don't exalt myself? Don't manipulate my Facebook page to make my life look perfect? Don't judge

my worth (or the worth of others) based on dress size, zip code, academic accomplishments, or professional titles? Don’t maximize my social capital at every opportunity? Wait Jesus, you mean for me to ignore rank— or worse — do you mean for me to destroy it? Don't network, don't schmooze, don't push for attention? Open my heart and home to people who can do nothing for me? People I have no love for? People I can't impress or earn favors from?

Why on earth should I do that?

Because Jesus insists on it. Because this is what God wants from us. God, the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. God, who turns us inside out and upside down because there is no end to the miserable human game of who is "in" and who is "out," and God in his wisdom knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation.

Though we have such a hard time believing it, Jesus insists that God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are already welcome, already loved, already known, and already cherished. The currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear. The table at the center of that kingdom has so many seats — all of them premier seats, all of them first-class seats, all of them honorable seats — that we don’t have to scramble and exhaust ourselves to secure a good spot anymore.

But let's face it: humility is a tricky thing. We too easily confuse it with keeping ourselves in the background, having low self-esteem, and turning our heads away in the face of oppression. Even if we manage to define it in healthy ways, humility betrays us;

the very instant at which I claim humility is the moment when it escapes me. Worse, our culture today hardly ever rewards or supports the humble. Whether we're talking entertainment, politics, sports, or even religion, we in Western cultures have an unhealthy admiration for the loudest, the biggest, and the greatest. Whether we recognize it or not, we are known around the world for idolizing the best. What would happen to the way we talk if we shunned the words "most" and "best?" What would we have left?

The sad truth is that Western cultures — and American culture in particular — is not known around the world for its humility. The sadder truth is that historic Christianity itself, especially as it has been practiced in the West, is not known around the world for its humility. This is a sad and costly state of affairs. A legacy we must own, grieve, and make right.

When we dare to gather at Jesus's table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward promotions and competitiveness that surrounds us. There's nothing easy or straightforward about this; it requires hard work over a long period of time. To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our elections, and that can be tiring. But it's what we're called to do — to humble ourselves and place our hope in a radically different kingdom.

Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior and manners at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveal the stuff of our souls. Favor the ones who cannot repay you. Prefer the poor. Choose obscurity. This is God's world we live in, and nothing here is ordinary. In the realm of God, the ragged strangers at our doorstep are the angels we will eat with in

heaven. In other words, in the words of Phil Collins, “Think twice, its just another day for you and me in paradise, just think about it.”

Let us pray:

Lord, we have been so thoughtless and greedy. We have looked for the limelight and not for the light of you love. We have tried to push our way to the head of Your table. Forgive us. Help us to serve you in all that we do, not with thoughts of praise for our efforts but with the joy of sharing your gospel truth that others might know your love and peace and sit with you at the table in your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

Commission & Benediction:

Beloved of the Lord, go in peace, knowing that God's peace will be with you always. Go in service in God's world, helping those in need, sharing the gifts you have been given. Go in love, and bring hope to all. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

For some of us here today, Lord, we wish the summer would never end. We have enjoyed opportunities to travel, to relax, to break away from schedules and hectic calendars. For others, there is the thrill of entering the new season; looking forward to the challenges ahead. On this Labor Sunday we gather to receive your blessings once again, that we may recognize your presence in our lives and use the gifts that you have given to us in service to others. As we have offered names and situations to you in prayer for your

compassionate healing love, we add our names as well. Heal our wounds, we pray.

Enable us to be strong in our commitment to you by serving others in need. Keep us open

always to your abiding love. For all this we ask in Jesus’ Name.