

12th Sunday after Pentecost Sept 1 2019

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16- Luke 14:1, 7-14

An explanation of what is going on here. We might be able to relate to the dynamics of what is going on at this party and table if we think about entertaining by rich and powerful people or even back to our own days in school.

The world of Jesus and the author of Luke was one based on honor and shame. This played out in these kinds of formal parties. Where you sat was an indicator of how much you were honored by the host and/or a reflection of your own honor relative to those others who were there. It was not unheard of for someone to take a seat that might be a little above their own estimation of their honor among the guests and be given that place, even if they weren't going to be there. A bold move to raise your own status.

You could also be shamed, asked to move to a lower seat. Jesus' advice is good and comes straight from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. But his aphorism about the humble being exalted and the exalted being humbled, uses language that echoes his own mandate in ministry (raise up the lowly and bring down the high) and uses a term (humble) that specifically encompasses the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In other words, Jesus is encouraging them to become like the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. To place themselves in their shoes.

Jesus' words of advice to his host are equally surprising. In this honor/shame culture nothing comes without strings attached. If you were invited to a party and accepted the invitation it was understood that there would be a reciprocal

invitation at some point. So, as a host, you invited those who would buff your own reputation and honor. You might even dare to invite someone who was a bit above your station and if they accepted, you'd really be buffed..."Did you see who went to his party!"

Jesus suggests that the next time his host has such a party he should not invite those who would invite him in return and therefore he is repaid. Rather, he should invite those who cannot repay; the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And he will be blessed/envied, because they cannot repay, and he will be repaid at the resurrection.

Now, this advice would sound ridiculous to the Pharisee. To him it would seem like a wasted invitation. The poor person could not invite them in return, so no opportunity for advancement there. Also, their coming would not buff his own reputation... at all. It would also be wasted because, by the convention that there must be a return invitation, and these people could not invite him back, they must decline. Basically, that's not the way things worked!

So, why did Jesus even say these things? I think that he was trying to proclaim the Gospel to these Pharisees and their pals as much as he was trying to raise up the poor. I see it in terms like last week, where my hope is that Jesus' words and actions freed the ruler of the synagogue from his bondage as well as the woman bent over. Here, I believe Jesus' hope is that by describing to them the way the kingdom of God works (everyone is invited to the table), he gets them to see the way in which they have really trivialized the intent of hospitality, of table fellowship. The way in which what they do now is contrary to the Kingdom of God.

If you look at the Hebrews text, what gets translated as hospitality to strangers, literally means love of the stranger. Do not neglect this, the author says, because by doing so...some have entertained angels without knowing it. Here he is referring to Abram offering hospitality to what turns out to be messengers of God. All Abram is doing is offering the hospitality required of anyone in that culture. It didn't matter if it was your worst enemy, if they needed food and shelter and came to your door you offered it. Why? Because some day it might be your turn. Because the world was a harsh place and all humans were united in the struggle against it.

Jesus' ask moves the Pharisee to see that they have turned hospitality into a transactional thing. What can you give me, bring me? What do you offer me? If it is worth something, then I'll invite you...otherwise, you're on your own. This is the antithesis of what the table of fellowship should be about. And, in many ways, just leads to death for everyone.

By getting them to see their actions in those terms, through the eyes of God and their faith, I believe Jesus hopes that they will see things anew. And risk the shame in this world, for honor in the eyes of God.

It certainly raises the question for us as an assembly, particularly one that gathers around a table that is not our own, but belongs to Christ. Who do we invite into this fellowship and what (if anything) do we expect from them in return? Is our invitation based on what someone brings to us, or not? Is our table open to all...I mean, all people? And if not, why not? Who in our estimation, does not belong at God's table?

Another thing got me thinking. This is the third time in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus sits at table with a Pharisee. Now, Jesus and the Pharisees don't, for the most part, get along very well. His gospel tends to run contrary to their own teaching. But... they continue to invite Jesus and he continues to accept. He continues to engage with those with whom he is in conflict. I believe this is because Jesus is seeking to proclaim the Good News to them as well. Because there is value in being present, being in relationship, even with those with whom he has deep differences.

If Jesus did something similar today, how do you think that would be received?

I think to the recent furor in the Democratic field when Joe Biden talked about how he was proud of the work he had done with two members of his own party, Dixiecrats from the South who supported racist Jim Crow laws designed to keep black people "in their place". He pointed out that he did not like what they stood for in those arenas one bit, but that they needed to be in relationship and work together to get things done for the country.

Mr. Biden was roundly criticized by his opponents and others on the left for those remarks. Proud! How dare you be proud of working with people who hold views that are contrary to our own! You can find similar kinds of rhetoric particularly from the Tea Party on the right, that to be in relationship or conversation, much less compromise, with those they were in conflict with on the left was heresy. Roundly condemned.

And yet... here Jesus sits. At the table. With the Pharisees, yet again. Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. What might that tell us about our relationship with those with whom we disagree?

The work of Christ, particularly in this Gospel of Luke, is to push us to remember that we are all created in the image of God, and because we bear that image within us, all are worthy of love and respect. The author of Hebrews is even more specific, calling on the faithful to love the stranger, the alien to our land; to think often of those who are in prison or being tortured as if our own bodies were with them. To literally put ourselves in their place. It is a radical mindfulness and care for those who are the least of these, the powerless in our society. Who are overlooked because, in the system we operate under, they are worth-less to us. As worth-less as the poor, the blind, the crippled, and the lame were to the Pharisees.

The Good News, and the challenging news, is that everyone is welcome at the table God provides and of which Jesus is the host.

It is good news to those who are so often shut out; the poor, sinners, the refugee, those who are in minorities; the oppressed, the abandoned.

It is a challenge for some of us, because...everyone is there.

Have any of you heard of the popular theologian Rob Bell? He wrote a book a number of years back called *Love Wins*. In this book, Bell states his belief that everyone goes to heaven, but that the experience for some will make it seem like hell.

To illustrate this, he uses the example of table fellowship. As Jesus points out time and again, everyone is welcome at the table of God. Rich and poor, blind and sighted, whole and broken. Bell makes the point that for many this will feel like heaven. They are welcome, there is a diversity of people, there is food

enough for all. But, what will that kind of table feel like for the KKK member who is seated next to an African American? Would it not seem like a version of hell? For heaven is the antithesis of what they have been living by; that white people are better/holier/worth more than black people.

I don't always agree with Mr. Bell and his theology, but in this case I would agree that it is only when our hearts are transformed, when we acknowledge the ways in which we have corrupted our understanding of the Kingdom of God, when we confess our sin in thinking of others as less, as not worthy, that we will ever be comfortable at that table.

This is a challenging and comforting text, my siblings in Christ. Challenging because it makes us look at our own hospitality. How and why do we invite people to the table in our own homes, in this congregation, and nationally? Is our table fellowship truly open to all, or have we turned it into an exchange between those who have power and prestige, who fit into a certain mold?

Comforting, because regardless of whether we are a Pharisee or one of the poor, if we hold the same racist views as the KKK or our skin is black, we are all invited to this table of Christ. To hear the good news that Jesus died so that we might be free. Free from poverty, discrimination, and despair. Free from bigotry, selfishness, and hate. Free from whatever binds us.

So come to the table one and all, receive the bread and wine that is Jesus' very own body and blood, given and shed that we might be freed from whatever binds us. Free to be one people, and to go into this world and invite everyone to join us in the Kingdom of God and sit together at this table.