

Sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14  
14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 29, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Some of you may be wondering what the pastor and his family did on their family vacation the past two weeks. To avoid having everyone ask me the same question, I'll give you all a brief account now. We were in Southern California – Los Angeles, San Diego, Long Beach, Upland and Covina for the Tan Family Reunion. I'll let the girls tell you about the times at the beach, or about kayaking, clamming, Newport Beach boat tour, family dodgeball, and other fun stuff. For Kim and me, this family reunion was about the food. Lots of it. Three times a day Kim and her sisters prepared food for 80 people, every day, for 10 days. Kim was the cook, her sisters were hosts, and I was along for the ride as Minnesota “go-fer” and official food taster. Though we officially had one banquet at a restaurant, it seemed to me like every meal was a banquet, with a Chinese or Cambodian feast several times a day. There was no seating chart or places of honor at this family's banquet, but I did observe how people acted in the buffet line getting their food. Did they go to the front of the line, did they choose the best morsels for themselves. Did they load up their plate, or take care to save enough for others? You can tell a lot about people by how they eat and how they behave in a food line.

Jesus spent a lot of his ministry observing people, especially at dinner parties served by his hosts – and then making lessons about their behavior for his disciples and his hosts. In today's gospel lesson Jesus was invited to a friendly Pharisee's house for dinner, and so Jesus had a chance to observe people (men, actually) jockeying for places of honor and prestige at their host's table. It gave him an opportunity to tell another parable (a story with a lesson attached). Jesus said, when you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't sit down in a place of honor, lest the host say you are sitting in the wrong place and demote you to a table near the kitchen! You will feel ashamed! Instead, choose a place at a table in the corner to enjoy your meal, and perhaps the host will invite you to come sit at a better place, near the head table! And here's the moral lesson: *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

Boy, as a child growing up in a second generation Swedish family, did I ever hear that often! Didn't most Scandinavian Lutheran children hear that from their mothers and fathers? Don't put yourself forward, because somebody will surely take you down. Wait for someone else to call you out, and raise you up – and most of all, don't call attention to yourself! Garisson Keillor had it right for a whole generation of Lutherans and Midwesterners, who found the doctrines of humility and quietness ingrained in their psyches (in the words of Thumper in *Bambi*, “if

you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all!"). Personally, I think those days are fading as modern American culture changes all of us, but many remember those lessons well. Can you relate to this at all?

So one of the key lessons Jesus taught from this banquet parable is that you and I should not be too proud, and seek to put ourselves forward, or seek status that we haven't earned. Wait for the host to raise you up and put you forward. This is totally counter-cultural in America today, if you pay attention to *Entertainment Weekly* and other sources of cultural information. Wasn't it just last year that everyone was shocked (shocked!) that a pair of social climbers were able to crash the state banquet held in the White House by President Obama for the Prime Minister of India? Remember how everyone was aghast that they got through security without an invitation, and even more aghast that it was so easy – and that they had the “chutzpa” to do it?! Today this couple is on their own “reality show”, and have weathered the momentary disapproval – and will probably profit by their escapade. So I think Jesus' lesson of humility is lost on a lot of people!

But there's another point Jesus made at this banquet, and this one was for the host – and all those who are hosts and want to receive credit for having done a good thing. When you give a banquet or a luncheon, don't just invite your relatives and friends, or your rich neighbors, so that they can repay you with a banquet invitation in return – so that you will have greater status. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, who can never repay you. Then you will truly be blessed. Your reward will be received at the resurrection of the dead (not here on earth).

This lesson isn't just for some rich folks in Washington or Hollywood trying to make themselves known by way of fancy dinner parties. I think this lesson is for the whole Church. Because Jesus is the true host at our table, every Sunday morning, and he has entrusted us (you and me) to invite the people and serve the food (which is not only the bread and wine, but also the good news of God's love for all!). Are we holding this worship service just to gather our families and friends in Christ to worship by ourselves, in this beautiful setting, and have a love feast for ourselves? Then we're no different or better than a host in Hollywood that only invites rich friends for a gourmet meal. For what is the point of our gathering? Yes it is to be together as the Body of Christ, the Church, to worship our Creator, and to learn from God's Word. But it is also to share the love of God in Christ Jesus with our neighbors, with strangers as well as our friends and family, like Jesus did. And to do this, we have to go out and invite somebody, in addition to those closest to us. If we don't, we are missing the whole point!

So who's invited to this meal anyway? Jesus suggests we should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. We should invite those who can never repay us – not only those potential future members of this congregation who could

help us pay our bills! If this is a banquet, shouldn't we be inviting those hungry? If you are serving a large quantity of food, you should invite people who are hungry enough to eat it – that is just common sense. If we have good news to share here as a Church (good news of God's love, forgiveness, and new life in Christ Jesus), then shouldn't we invite some folks who may want to hear some good news in their lives for once?

Of course, that tends to become the hard part. Where do we start? Who do we ask? What if they don't want to come? And we have such a large space to fill here at Redeemer! Well, Jesus didn't say it would be easy. He knows he is calling us all to do something not natural for human beings. But the truth is, we have to start doing it, because this is the one true way to be the Church. If the Church is about sharing good news, hearing God's Word, granting absolution and forgiveness of sins, serving Christ's Body and Blood, and showing hospitality to strangers, then we had better start doing it! And we had best invite a few strangers to join us for the banquet God is holding for everybody!

Today the Holy Eucharist that we share is a sign of that great banquet God is preparing for all of us – because God would like us to know a bit what it will be like, and have the Church give an example to the world. At this meal we serve today, everyone is welcome. Our host is Jesus himself, and he has invited the whole world to come. At this meal everyone has been invited to come to the table: the old, the young, the happy, the sad, the good looking and the above average, the sick and the lame. We come from all places throughout the world – from North America and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Some of us own our homes, some are renters, some are single and some are married. Some of us have been here many times before, and some of you have never been here before.

To you who are here for the first time: we're glad you came, and you are welcome here always. We hope you come again. To you who have been here before, we're glad you're back! Would you bring a friend with you when you come next time? And to the Church gathered here, let's go out and invite others to join us in this meal that is unlike no other – a taste of bread and wine, the body and blood of our Lord. Jesus created this meal so that we could all be together, so that we who follow Jesus can invite others to come to this table also. A table where everyone is welcome; no matter who you are, what you have done, or what you think. A table where you can be healthy or sick, happy or grieving, gay or straight, married or single, young or old, black or white or yellow or red or purple or green! With God there are no distinctions, for at this meal we are all guests! We are all children of God welcomed back to our family table with our Lord Jesus as the host.

So c'mon Church, let's go out there and invite our neighbors, family, friends, and strangers all, to join us at the table. God knows there is plenty of room in God's house and in this Church to accommodate a larger crowd. The question

is: is there room in our hearts for this as well? Let's find out! And in the meantime, welcome to God's table! Thanks be to God! Amen.