

Sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14
15th Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

One of the few “perks” for pastors is that you often get seated at a “reserved table” at wedding receptions. It’s not a big deal, actually, but it is convenient. At most wedding receptions where there is assigned seating, the wedding couple put the pastor and their spouse with the parents. Which is actually a choice seat, because you get to go through the buffet line right after the wedding party, or are served fairly early. The couple figures that at least the parents want to know the pastor better (even if nobody else does!), and won’t be intimidated like other younger guests might! (We clergy are pretty intimidating, with our black suits and collars, I guess!) They also seat grandma at this table, which puts everybody on their good behavior (including the pastor!). So there is at least one “safe table” for adults at every wedding. They might bring a glass of wine to that table, but the bottles of beer and scotch are usually found elsewhere, at the aunts and uncles’ table, or even more likely, the cousins’ tables. You’ve been to weddings, right?

Contrast this with the Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner tables in most family homes or restaurants. Everybody seems to have their assigned or naturally place – couples seated together, often with the “generations” or the genders segregated – elders and grandparents together, and younger adults at the far end. Everyone then tries to sit close to someone who is fun to talk to, or doesn’t spill food. And then there is the “kids’ table”. This is usually the most fun table, because their parents leave them alone (they are too busy keeping order among those who are likely to fight). Kids get to eat what they want without vegetables, and laugh with their peers, oblivious to any family tension. Teenagers and pre-teens are deathly afraid of being sent to the “kid’s table”, because they want to be considered “adults” – not kids – and don’t want to be stuck with babysitting their annoying younger siblings. (Am I right about this?) But sometimes an older youth, or even a mature adult, find themselves relegated to the kid’s table because there are no more chairs, or you came late. Well, it’s complicated.

LONG STORY SHORT, human beings (being social animals) are accustomed to finding their appropriate places at the dinner table, and most often seek a better spot than assigned by their social “order”. This is not much different than a pride of African lions, who eat in the order of alpha male first, then the others, in order of strength, gender, or age. Kind of like a wedding banquet, or Christmas dinner with the Griswolds in *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

So today we read a passage in the gospel where Jesus is, once again, eating dinner at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. I think Jesus liked to eat a lot, or at

least he liked dinner parties, where he and his disciples were invited to eat and drink and talk with the important people in a town. You can tell a lot about people in how they relate to each other at dinner, and the gospels are full of the conversations Jesus got into, and the stories he told at such dinners. He must have been a popular guest, because they kept inviting him back! And to be invited to the dinner where Jesus was a guest must have been a very “hot ticket”. Because Jesus was always interesting, and wasn’t afraid to gently take a host to task, or put people “in their place” or even challenge them – at dinner!

Which is what was happening at this particular dinner party. As people began to sit down, Jesus noticed people jockeying for position at the table. It seems that people wanted to sit in honored spots, so that Jesus and the disciples and other guests would see them as “important”. It was a great opportunity for Jesus to teach a lesson about pride. Without having to single anyone out or embarrass them, he simply told them all a story – a parable about a wedding banquet – something familiar to everyone. If you are invited to a wedding banquet, don’t seek the most prestigious place of honor – for you might be told to move to a different place so a more important person can sit there. You will be embarrassed. Instead, why not sit in the lowest spot, so that the host can invite you to take a better place, and so honor you. You would like that much better! And then Jesus attached the moral to the story, *“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* The world turned upside down.

I wonder what the dinner guests thought when Jesus said this? Luke doesn’t say. We can only imagine. But were there a few ears burning, among those guests who had been trying to get a better place at the table? Did the room go silent as people tried to figure out whether Jesus was talking directly to them? But the conversation moved right along, as Jesus directed his words to the host.

He said, *“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich relatives, 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. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

It would be too simple for this just to be Jesus’ reprimand to the dinner host about who to invite to dinner in the future. This is where the conversation turned to one being about the kingdom of God, and the resurrection! The subject was much bigger than any dinner party-goer’s expectations, even beyond their comprehension. This wasn’t really about a dinner party, and it wasn’t even about Jesus doing a miracle, or whatever else they expected to hear from him.. This was about who was in and who was out in our human social order, and how God had sent Jesus with the message that God was turning it all upside down! Who you and I think is important may not be so. In fact, those whom we think of least, God

considers most important of all! The world is being stood upon its head, and Jesus introduced it with one turn of the conversation at dinner!

So this isn't really about you and me making sure we sit close to the kids' table at Thanksgiving, or head to the back of the line. It's not about who you and I invite to dinner next Sunday, either – although it might be! It's really about who you and I “see” in this world – who we think matters – and who is invisible to us, who are never seen when God's abundance in this world is shared (or not shared)! For to God, those whom we think are most insignificant and don't see, or the ones whom God notices most of all. Jesus has come to remind us to open our eyes and our ears, to hear their voices and their cries, when we'd rather they disappear, and not be in the room at all – out of sight and out of mind.

Because we know there is the *world as it is* and there is the *good news of God's kingdom – as it will be!* You and I know how the world is. This world isn't fair, where many never receive invitations to dinner parties, or may not even have enough to eat at their own tables! There are people who don't get paid a living wage, who don't have health insurance, who may not even be allowed paid sick and safe time, who aren't included or represented when big decisions are made. This is not the world as God created it to be. This is a *fallen world*.

But Jesus is calling us – you and me – to live as if God's kingdom is already here and present with us. Because God's kingdom breaks in when we break out of our own closed circles and invite others in or meet them in theirs. It comes when barriers between us are broken down, and we are transformed by God's mercy. How much of that future is *now*?

In his first sermon in Nazareth, Jesus proclaimed “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor....Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

Back to the dinner party. In the past, we have had lots of congregational dinners, when people whom we know are invited – other church members, friends and relatives. We call them “church pot lucks” in Minnesota, when everyone brings a dish to share. We invite people who might help us financially with the church, or at least, whom we enjoy sitting and eating with. When we go out to invite people to worship with us, or become part of this congregation, we usually imagine, at least subconsciously, that they will be a contributing partner in this endeavor called “church”. But Jesus has something else in mind. He tells us when we invite people to come, to seek out those who maybe cannot contribute financially, whom we invite for the sake of the gospel, with the same thinking that God has – that we invite to dinner those who need to eat!

Two Sundays from now we are having a meal here at Redeemer after worship. We are crossing the street to invite our neighbors. We are inviting those who live at Dale Street Place to come and eat with us. We've done this before. They are folks who need medical assistance and live on social security income, who have physical and mental health issues, and some are just a step away from homelessness. People from Dale Street Place, the old "Redeemer's Arms" always appreciate the meals we cook for them, the times we invite them to come on over and eat. They like our spaghetti. But they seldom worship with us. Some do, but usually they come for the food, and maybe the fellowship. Perhaps that's what Jesus is saying here. Go out and invite people from this community who can't give back to us what we think we need or want – that is, regular worshippers, tithes and offerings.

But maybe, when we do these things – serve our neighbors, invite people who cannot pay to come and eat with us, the table we set with hospitality will also be a table that attracts other guests as well! By making our focus of hospitality those who cannot repay us in any way, our true intention – hospitality and welcome in the name of Christ– will be revealed as if it came from Jesus himself! Those who are able to give back will be attracted by the humble hospitality and proclamation of the gospel – God's Word, God's work, with our voices and our hands, when it is given without expectation or *quid pro quo*.

Could it be that such invitations to our humble banquets are a taste of God's future kingdom in the here and now? When we eat at one table as sisters, brothers and friends in Christ with those we haven't met, or left to our own devices, even wish to meet? In congregations throughout the country on Sunday the 11th many meals and acts of service similar to ours will take place, where the purpose is to reach out to others with love, to give without repayment, and the only "agenda" is to serve. It's a living parable for what congregational ministry should be about: going outside the doors of the church to serve, and to welcome strangers to come feast from the abundance at God's table of grace.

I close with a story. Once upon a time in the early church, there was a man named Lawrence. He was ordained a deacon by Pope Sixtus II of Rome, who put him in charge of the church treasury and their charity work. In the year 257 the Roman emperor Valerian began a persecution of the church, focusing on clergy and confiscating church property. Pope Sixtus and the other six deacons of Rome were arrested and executed. Lawrence was also arrested and tortured. Legend says that the Roman governor demanded that Lawrence turn over the church's treasure, so Lawrence secretly distributed much of the church monies to the poor. Then he gathered the blind, the lame, the maimed, lepers, orphans and widows of Rome. He presented them to the governor and said, "Here is the treasure of the Church." Then he was executed. Another legend says that Lawrence was slowly

burned to death on an iron grill, at one point courageously telling his executioners to “Turn me over - I’m done on that side.” But this was likely due to a mistranslation of the Latin word *passus est* “he passed” to *assus est* “he was roasted”, in stories about the event. One missing letter “p” changed the meaning of the word for Lawrence’s execution and created a legend! But it did make Lawrence, who died on August 10th, the patron saint of cooks, chefs and comedians!

To the church over the ages, the saints of the church are not only the martyrs who have died for their witness, but all those believers who die in the Lord. And the Church, for all of its riches, has always considered our greatest treasure not the grand cathedrals made of stone or crystal, but the people whom we serve - especially the most vulnerable: those who are poor, the aged, the sick, the blind, and all who suffer. This focus of our church’s ministry has its roots in Jesus’ words of advice to his host at a dinner party: “*when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*” That is our mission. Thanks be to God. Amen.