

Table Etiquette
Luke 14:1,7-14
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Rev. Don Best
Bethel Presbyterian Church
West Union, IA
September 1, 2015

Our Gospel Reading for today comes to us from The Gospel of Luke chapter 14, verse 1 and verses 7 through 14. It is the sabbath, and Jesus is in the home of a prominent Pharisee. In the verses that we skip, Jesus once again heals someone on the sabbath, then in our reading Jesus gives instruction on etiquette at a wedding feast. Listen to our reading from Luke, chapter 14:

^{14:1} On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a 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.

¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Most of us, I think, have been to a big wedding reception. The kind where a meal is served, and table after table, are marked with little tents showing who is to sit where. I can only imagine the planning that goes into one of these events. Deciding who sits where. Who doesn't sit by who, and who cannot be seated at the same table with someone else. Someone is certain to be

unhappy with their assigned seat. Either they don't know, or don't like someone at their table, or the table they are given isn't close enough to the head table, or too far from the buffet, or too close to the music speakers. Open seating just seems so much simpler. And, was apparently the practice during the time of Jesus.

In chapter 14 of Luke, Jesus has been invited to the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. The dinner was on the Sabbath, and Luke tells us that they, the religious leaders, were watching him closely. Presumably to see what he would do, how he would behave. Then our reading jumps down to verse 7. When the guests were arriving and finding seats at the table. Each of them was deciding where to sit. Apparently, seating was not assigned. Jesus perceives that some of the guests thought they were worthy of more desirable seating, which prompted some teachings on table etiquette.

What Jesus says seems like good advice. "...go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

One should not presume to be worthy of the higher seat at the table, but sit at the lowest seat. Being asked to move up, is much better than being asked to move down.

Many years ago, I visited an army base with our son's boy scout troop. On the base there was a row of houses. Each of different size and design. They were houses for the officers and their families. It was explained to us that the officers could choose which house they wanted to live in, but should an officer of higher rank decide they wanted to live in your house, you had to move. This was called being "ranked out."

Jesus is cautioning against being "ranked out" at the feast. Sage advice, I think. But not original to Jesus. In Proverbs, chapter 25, Solomon is attributed for giving similar wisdom: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

"Do not put yourself forward." "Sit at the lowest place."

But Jesus has more on his mind, than table etiquette. In the next verse Jesus says: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The advice on where to sit at a banquet, as does so much of the teaching of Jesus, has an eschatological meaning. In the end times, in the kingdom of God, worldly rank and social standing will be

reversed. In the kingdom, God's point of view matters more than our own, and more than the assessment of those in a position to turn the spotlight on us, or away from us.

After giving advice to the crowd, Jesus turns his attention to the hosts:

"When you give a luncheon or a 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."

Difficult instruction when you are planning a feast in your home. Naturally you want to invite family and friends, maybe the boss you want to impress. But the heart of this teaching is twofold. First do not invite people expecting them to pay you back, and second invite those less fortunate; those who couldn't pay you back in any way.

The church where I did an internship hosted a monthly "Taco Supper." Much of the area around the church had changed from middle class to poorer families. There were two schools nearby with many students on free and reduced lunches. So, the members decided to host a monthly Taco dinner, inviting families from the school and from the area. They also played bingo and the prizes were household items that everyone needs. Items that can't be purchased with food stamps. They also had a table full of children's books that could be taken home, for free. This wasn't a large church, and they didn't have a big budget. In the beginning there were some who wondered what was in it for the congregation? Would any of the people who came to the dinners be joining the church? Jesus said not to invite those who could repay your invitation, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Jesus' instruction to the host of the sabbath meal is instruction to every church, that follows his teaching, on how to reach out and provide for those less fortunate. Expecting nothing in return.

Again, just as before, there is an eschatological meaning: "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

In God's kingdom, where God's way of seeing and doing are the norm, "...those who humble themselves will be exalted," and "...you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

For us, and for the church, these verses are more than table etiquette and party planning, for us this is instruction on how to be church in this world. IN

a world where status and reciprocity motivate what we do and how we behave. Where prestige is highly valued and social standing is rewarded. But this world is not God's kingdom...not yet.

However, in this world there is a place where we get a glimpse of God's kingdom, and God's heavenly banquet. Right here at the table of the Lord, where they will come from east and west, and south and north, to sit at table in the kingdom of God.

At this table there is no seat of honor. All who gather around are humbled by the One who gave his life for us. All who gather at this table, honor the One who is the host. The table where all are invited to gather around. Where there is no rank, or prestige, or social standing. This table where all are welcome, no matter what you have, or who you are. All are invited to this table.

At this table, Jesus says: Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This is the Lord's table. Our savior invites all who trust in him to share in the feast which he has prepared. Come, then, to the joyful feast of our Lord.