

“A Place at the Table”
 August 28, 2016
 Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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

"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; 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.

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

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. 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."

Introduction

You know the scene. It's like one of those power lunches. In today's gospel reading Jesus has been invited to the house of a leader of the Pharisees on the sabbath for a meal. It's a gathering of local VIP's. Despite all the trouble Jesus has brought on himself because of the scandalous things he has been doing on the sabbath, such as healing people, he has been invited to this meal at this house and he has accepted the invitation.

Today's passage reminds me of an old 45 record, because it has two sides. On a 45 there's a song on side "A". Flip it over and there's another song, usually just as good, on the "B" side. At this meal Jesus will have an opportunity to have two important conversations: one with the guests, and one with the host. Luke opens the story like this:

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.

So, that's the scene. There they are, all around the table. They are watching him, but he is also watching them. And he notices a couple of things.

Where to Sit

The first thing Jesus notices is where people are choosing to sit; *He notices how the guests are choosing the places of honor.*

Meals are settings for social relationships to play out. First century Palestine is a culture framed by notions of honor and shame. Meals become a venue for honor and shame to play out based on where you sit and recline at the table. The better the spot, the more the honor. For us, perhaps, it's where you sit on a plane, or at the stadium, or at a restaurant. Our tendency to keep society stratified never seems to go away. And we have a sixth sense of where that better seat is in any setting. That is how we are. But there's another way. The Jesus way. He tells them a parable:

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet," he says, "do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 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."

It's how to avoid shame. This is good ole' ancient Jewish wisdom Jesus is laying down here; right out of Proverbs 25:

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. (Proverbs 25:6-7)

"But when you are invited," Jesus says, "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.

This is not only an instruction on how to avoid shame; it's a lesson about the kingdom of God. Jesus says one more thing to them:

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

It's that re-occurring theme we hear all through the gospels; that paradox of reversals. The upside-down kingdom of God is one of several paradoxes in our faith. It's a mystery. But it's the mysteries of life that transforms us; and we must wrestle with them. And when we let these paradoxes work on us they re-align our understanding, and renew our mind, and we experience the world in surprisingly new ways. We begin to see things as Jesus sees them.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The leader of all will be the servant of all. In Christ we no longer scramble to get the best seat; that would only lead to our shameful fall. Instead we humbly, but naturally in our true, non-striving selves, find ease in the seat of lowest esteem. From there, real honor will come.

Who to Invite

There is something Jesus else notices—the guests themselves; who they are, and where they fit into society. So, where is the host? Where is the man who invited these people? Jesus has something to say to this leader of the Pharisees.

He finds him and says, *"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."*

Reciprocation. I give to you, you give to me. This is a strong cultural expectation. *I put out a big spread today, I am sure you will do the same for me next time.* This is

how it works. We do each other favors. Just be sure to hold up your end of the deal, and all will be fine. That's why we prefer to deal with people we know will make good. But there is another way. A harder way. The Jesus way.

"When you give a banquet," Jesus says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

You know, the ones who never get invited anywhere for anything. But what good, we might think, does it do to invite *them*? Is it worth it? At the time of Luke's gospel the blind and the lame were not even given entry to the temple. How easily some people are forgotten. And not much has changed. How convenient for us to look the other way as if these people are not there. Honestly, let's face it, some people are just not worth our time. That is until we learn to cry about what makes Jesus cry and then to reach out to them.

"And you will be blessed," Jesus says, "because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

It's a lesson in grace. It's a story about inviting and including the forgotten ones, the despised ones, the ignorant and defective ones. The broken people, the failures, the drunkards, and the addicts.

It's about giving to someone who cannot and will not ever pay you back. This is a matter of how we interact with fellow human beings. It's a transformation from "Is there something in it for me?" to giving without expecting anything in return. That is what grace means.

Because this is how God interacts with us. In holiness, as human beings, we are poor; extremely poor. Spiritually speaking, we are blind. Morally, we are crippled. But the Good News is that we are invited to the Table; the Table of grace, the Table of God. And we are the kind of guests who enjoy the meal even though we will never be able to pay it back. This is grace.

Our Mission

This means something then to us in our journey of faith. It comes back to the two-part Great Commandment that tells us to love God with all that we are, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is what guides us in our personal spiritual development and our collective ministry as the body of Jesus Christ.

Today's story tells us to humble ourselves and to invite people to the Table. Humbling ourselves helps us to love God. Inviting people to the Table of God helps us to love our neighbors.

We all have a deep need to belong; to believe we have a place at the Table. And don't you know that God's table is ever expanding.

So invite someone to church next week for our celebration of Holy Communion. That is the Table that God opens to all. Invite someone to church two weeks from today for Rally Sunday here at Island Heights UMC. There will be a baptism that day, and it will be the first day back for Sunday school students. There will be a fellowship time afterwards. Two weeks from today there will be place for everyone at the Table! There are people who have not had a place at the Table for a very long time. Invite them. Assure them there is a place at the Table for them.

At the holidays, if either Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner is at Joan's parents' home, her mother Barbara sets the most delightful table. All through the years there were times when people other than family members would be invited; people who just needed a place to belong on such a day. And Barbara would put name cards at each person's spot. One time I even found a name card tucked under the floral centerpiece of someone who had died but was never forgotten by our most gracious host. Everyone always had a place at the table. A place with our name on it.

Invite. Invite. Invite. We have all been given a place at the Table, but the Table is large and there is enough room for all. We are called to fill the chairs at that table. And it's just us at the Table. We are nobody special. We just humbly take a lesser spot to make sure the good seats are saved for others. But then, in the end, we are honored when we are called up by name and we find the Lord treasures each and every one of us beyond measure. Amen.