

Introduction

Our Gospel reading in Luke, chapter 14 reminds me of a story I read about a hungry little boy in rural India.

The little boy's parents were devoted members of their church, and it was customary that elders and preachers would often spontaneously show up at their home for lunch after Sunday services. Food wasn't always plentiful and cooking rice and curry over a wood stove took time.

Because the rules of hospitality dictated that "men of God" eat first, the little boy and his siblings had to wait quite a while to eat on Sundays. Only when the honored guests had had their fill and left would the little boy's mother gather the leftovers and feed the children.

Now the little boy — being only four years old at the time — did not find this weekly occurrence pleasing at all! One Sunday afternoon he was feeling especially hungry. As a matter of fact, his mother had already shooed him out of the kitchen a dozen times or more — well, he just plain lost it. Marching into the dining room where the guests were relishing their second helpings, our little boy stuck his little hands to his hips and yelled, "Get out! Hurry up and leave so I can eat!"

I think Jesus would have appreciated this story!

He wasn't really known for his politeness around food either. The Gospels contain many stories of Jesus receiving and accepting dinner invitations during the years of his ministry and most often those mealtime scenes end in drama, scandal, and even insult. Once, a woman of debatable reputation caressed his feet under the table. Sometimes he interrupted a meal to heal sick people on the Sabbath. Often, he ate with dirty hands, shared a table with folks others considered to be riff-raff, and sometimes he even drank more than his enemies considered respectable. But worst of all — he said things - blunt, embarrassing things — that no one cared to hear.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke describes such a scene. Turn with me to Luke 14:1-14.

Scripture

¹ One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

² There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body.

³ Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?'

⁴ But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.

⁵ Then he asked them, 'If one of you has a child or a donkey or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?'

⁶ And they had nothing to say.

⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, "Give this person your seat." Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, "Friend, move up to a better place." Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Sermon

Picture the scene with me...

Jesus is invited for a Sabbath meal by a leader of the Pharisees. He got there early and he sees a man who is suffering, swollen, and ill – some scriptures versions say he had "dropsy" – so Jesus heals him just as he had healed the bent over woman last Sabbath in the Synagogue. Then, the Synagogue Leader had chastised the woman and Jesus contending that this sort of thing shouldn't happen on the Sabbath to which Jesus soundly corrected him.

This time it seems that no one had anything to say. So Jesus healed the man and sent him on his way.

After that, Jesus sits and observes his fellow guests as they arrive. He watches them jockeying for places of honor around the table. Like the elders and preachers who showed up at the little boy's home in rural India, these guests know the pecking order, and they relish it. If I'm imagining the scene correctly, they jostle and shove each other, pretending to be dignified while still fighting for prestigious spots at the table, near the host, or near another honored guest.

After observing their drama for a while, Jesus calls them out with a parable. Knowing full well the social rules of his day, he shuns them and calls instead for a revolution – not one that requires fighting and bloodshed – but rather a revolution of true hospitality – hospitality on God's terms – filled with love, mercy, and grace.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, don't sit down in the place of honor," he advises his fellow guests. "Go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.'" "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

As if that isn't counter-cultural enough, Jesus turns to his host and continues: "When you give a luncheon or dinner, don't invite your friends or your relatives or your rich neighbors, hoping they may invite you in return, and so you would be repaid. But rather, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

The scriptures don't tell us how Jesus' listeners reacted. We don't know if they laughed, if they shook their heads in disbelief, if they questioned Jesus' sanity, if they argued back, or if they followed his advice.

All I know is how I feel, how I find myself responding to this story as I read and re-read it. I feel an uncomfortable combination of surprise, skepticism, and fear. As in: Really? Is Jesus serious? Does he have any idea what he's asking?

It appears he does.

Often, just as I'm growing comfortable with my faith, a story like this one comes along to shatter my complacency.

Don't exalt myself? Don't insist on the recognition I deserve? Ignore the pecking order — or worse — upend it? Don't network, don't schmooze. Instead open my heart and open my home to people who can do nothing for me. People I have no affection for? People I can't impress, people I won't be earning favors from, people who won't make me look better? Why on earth should I do that?

Because Jesus insists on it...

Because this is who God is... the Great Reverser of our priorities; the Up-ENDER of our hierarchies; and the Re-Orderer of our values...

Because there is no end to the game of who is "in" and who is "out," and God in his wisdom knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation.

Because God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is a kingdom community of abundance, where everyone is already welcome, everyone is already loved, and everyone is already cherished.

And because the currency of that kingdom is humility not arrogance; generosity not stinginess; and true hospitality not fear.

Humility is a tricky thing. We often think — and wrongly so I might add — that to have humility is to think of oneself as unworthy.

Even if we manage to define humility in a healthy way, humility can betray us — the very instant at which I claim to achieve humility is the moment when it eludes me. Worse yet, very little in American culture rewards or supports the humble.

Whether we're talking about entertainment, politics, sports, or even religion, we in Western culture have an unhealthy admiration for the loudest, the biggest, and the greatest. Whether we recognize it or not, we are known around the world for idolizing the magnificent. What would happen to our conversation if we shunned the word "best?"

The key to it all is a healthy humility: not a humility that negates or devalues anyone but instead, a humility that recognizes all people as equals before God; a humility that values all human life and tries to see Christ in everyone.

But here's some good news!

When we dare to gather at Jesus' table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us. This table is subversive! And living this way... there's nothing easy or straightforward about this; it requires hard work over a long period of time.

And yet – to eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our world our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our Presidential elections, and that can be tiring.

But it's what we're called to do — to humble ourselves and to place our hope in a radically different kingdom; to love God with all that we are and to live out that love in true hospitality to all of God's children and creation.

Remember the little boy from rural India who turned Sunday dinner upside down by demanding to be fed to?

I bet that Jesus would applaud that ravenous little four-year-old as he broke the rules and challenged the hierarchy. In fact, if I'm reading Luke's story correctly, I believe Jesus would have ushered those men of God right out of the room, and insisted that the little children eat first. Favor the ones who cannot repay you. Prefer the poor. Choose obscurity.

Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters — because it does. It matters at this table (Communion table) and at every table at which we have a seat. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome – the people for whom we make room – reveals the stuff of our souls.

This is God's world we live in and nothing here is ordinary. In this realm, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels.

With Thanks:

Journey With Jesus, "Table Manners", by Debie Thomas, Posted 21 August 2016
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1070-table-manners>