



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Dinner Party

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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.' (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

If you've ever been to wedding or a fundraising dinner, you know the routine: you find your name in a sea of place-cards on the table at the entranceway, and armed with your table number, you wind your way through a maze of

identical round tables until you find your assigned spot. You pray you'll be seated near someone interesting ... or at least someone you know ... or at very least, someone *not* on the far opposite end of your political views who pontificates the whole time!

As a pastor, I've been to hundreds of wedding receptions, but I only came to appreciate the intricacies of this dance when our daughter got married two years ago. Oh, my goodness, the grid we put together as RSVPs came in! How carefully we worked with Annie and her fiancé, as well as her future in-laws, to insure the right honors and avoid unintended insults; to promote good conversation and avoid political train-wrecks.

Which brought to mind another wedding I'd been to, years ago, when my college roommate got married. Mary and Dave and their parents had planned a lovely reception. It wasn't easy to figure out the seating: their friends, business associates, and their enormous Italian families didn't neatly divide into tables of ten – but they worked it out. And then, when they arrived at the reception hall, along with all of their guests, they discovered an unfortunate error. Instead of tables for *ten*, the hall had set up tables for *eight*. Mary, refusing to be further upset by the chaos, hid in the bathroom until the problem was solved, leaving Dave to comfort her through the ladies' room door – and, for whatever reason, she had *me* reassign the guests. In retrospect, I have no clue why their parents let me do it, but there I was, with a couple other bridesmaids, arbitrarily putting tables together. Aside from their immediate families and college buddies, we had no clue who was who. It was the most unconventional seating arrangement in history, with

Dave's boss, someone's great aunt from Sicily, and Mary's mother's bridge partner all at the same table.

Finding one's place at the table is the focus of today's Gospel lesson. The occasion is a dinner party, a Sabbath dinner at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, a dinner where one's place matters very much. Many VIPs have been invited – but there are no place-cards here, and Jesus watches as the guests carefully eye each other, assessing their relative prestige. There is no scramble for places of honor – the guests are too sophisticated for that. Rather, it is a highly choreographed ritual, as guests gather in small groups, greet one another as they enter, and slowly, politely, make their way to the seat with the greatest honor appropriate to their station.

Jesus observes all this – their careful ranking, their desire for esteem, and he offers this advice: when you're invited to a banquet, don't take the place of honor, lest someone more important comes, and in disgrace, you have to move to the lowest spot. Instead, start at the bottom, and the host will ask you to go up higher. Then you will be honored in front of everyone.

Twenty centuries later, it is easy for us to see the shallowness of the Pharisees' preoccupation with rank. But for Jesus, it's not just about the dinner party, is it? Jesus uses the dinner-party as a metaphor for our lives ... for the thousands of ways our human tendency for ranking manifests itself. For the ways we assess our worth by whether we're given the highest or the lowest spots – literally, at dinner, and broadly, in every aspect of life. We gauge our place based on what we have, who we know, how

well we're liked, where we belong, all in relation to other people's standing.

And we are constantly reminded how important – or unimportant – we are – down to our frequent-flyer status at the airport. Now that I fly a lot for the seminary, gosh, I feel special! We measure ourselves *constantly* - by the jobs we've held and the money we make; by our children's sports or SAT scores; by the company we keep – of education, race, or class. Sometimes we're not content with our standing, and driven by ambition or anxiety, we aspire to the next rung up, to climb the ladder of prestige. Sometimes we try to work around the system, evidenced most recently in the embarrassing college admissions scandal. And sometimes, we just try to climb the ladder on our own.

We don't talk much about how it feels when we're outsiders, or placed at the lowest seat at life's table. But now and then it's clear.

- When I served at churches in Chicago, parishioners told me that it was the “power breakfast” table that mattered. As political or professional insiders met, decisions were made, deals cut, relationships forged, all before the last sip of morning coffee. To be excluded was more than symbolic slight: it meant not having access to power. Who really belonged?
- When my dear former Sunday school teachers, a lovely couple, moved to a retirement home, the noonday dinner is the social event of the day. And since residents sit at the same spot each day, religiously, they awaited a welcome to join a group. And they waited. Week after week, they waited. They were crushed when nobody

included them; they ate at a table alone. Would they ever belong?

- And then there's the young man I heard in a radio interview some years ago. He described going home for a dinner party his mother threw in honor of his birthday. It was elegant: silver candelabra and fresh flowers; each place set with bone china, silver service, and a linen napkin. Each place, that is, except for *his*. At his place, his mother set a paper plate, plastic silverware, and a paper napkin. The young man, her son, has AIDS. Out of ignorance or fear, her effort to honor her son disgraced her son instead. Did he belong at his home anymore? Did he belong anywhere?

What is *our* place at the table? And what kind of place do we prepare for others, whether those we love, or strangers in our midst? What place do we set for the powerful and strong, and what place, Jesus asks, do we set for the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame? In our time, as in Christ's, some people are greatly honored, while others are disparaged. There is great disparity, great inequity, and great heartache in this world. But over and over and over again, Jesus tells us this: it is not so in the kingdom of God.

Let me say it again: *It is not so in the kingdom of God.*

We *know* that in our heart of hearts, which is why our hearts ache when Muslims are mass-murdered as they worship in New Zealand, and Jews are gunned down as they worship here in Pittsburgh. *It is not so in the kingdom of God.*

We *know* this, which is why our hearts ache year after year after year for police departments across our country, and the perfect stew of unconscious bias and systemic racism that takes the life of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and Michael Brown in St. Louis, and Philando Castile in St. Paul, and Antwon Rose here in Pittsburgh. There is great disparity, great inequity, and great heartache in this world, but we know that *it is not so in the kingdom of God*.

We *know* this in our heart of hearts, which is why we keep rolling up our sleeves in Christ's name – the work your congregation is doing for education and housing access and medical care in Haiti and India and Malawi; the difference you're making through Garfield Community Farm and the Food Bank and City Mission and Treasures for Troops, and so much more.

We *know* that disparity and inequity do not belong *in the kingdom of God* – which is why you keep making an impact through your own passionate endeavors - the work of the Homewood Cooperative, and the scholarship contributions you make to Pittsburgh Seminary to make sure that future pastors can afford the education that they need, and all the ways you're trying to insure that God's justice is realized for *everyone* – *especially* everyone whose heart has every reason to be cynical and jaded. There is great disparity, great inequity, and great heartache in this world, but we *know* that *it is not so in the kingdom of God*.

We *know* this in our heart of hearts: we know that God is in the business of welcome, regardless of whether we deserve it, regardless of our wealth or poverty, regardless of the color of our skin or our grades or our economic status –

we know that *all* of us are children of God who belong at the table, we know that the table was never meant to be set just for us. We know that *this is what the kingdom of God looks like*: In a world obsessed with status and position, it is possible to create places where everyone is welcome, where each is honored, each matters, and strangers are drawn into the banquet of life.

And sometimes ... sometimes we find ourselves to be the guests who are given an unexpected place.

There's a short film that I have come to love. It's called "The Lunch Date." It opens with a 70-ish year-old woman, smartly dressed, complete with hat and gloves, clutching her shopping bags as she makes her way through Grand Central Station in New York. Finished with her morning shopping, she purchases her ticket back home to the suburbs. Finding herself with time to kill before her train leaves, she heads to the lunch counter and orders a Chef's salad. She discovers to her dismay that she barely has enough money to purchase her salad; perhaps her cash was stolen when she was buying her ticket; and she doesn't have her credit cards on her either. Still, she's satisfied to have her ticket and her meal, and settles in to a booth with her packages and salad. But oh! She has forgotten her silverware and a napkin, so she leaves her booth for a moment to get them.

As she returns to her place, she is startled to find a stranger there: a large man, disheveled and dirty, probably homeless. He is sitting in the booth, and he is eating her salad. She is astounded, and soon her amazement turns to fury. She sits down across from him and stares. He stares

back, but continues eating. She speaks, demanding, “Give me my salad! That is *my* salad!” He says nothing, but continues to eat. She reaches for the plate and tries to take it from him, but he clutches it and keeps on eating. Horrified, but really hungry and terribly angry, she finally takes her fork and digs in to the salad too. She is determined that it won’t be taken from her. He takes a bite. She stabs at the plate, and takes a bit. He continues to eat, and so does she. At last the plate is empty. The meal complete, the man rises – but instead of leaving, goes back to the lunch counter and buys some coffee – not one, but two cups. He offers her one, and even offers cream and sugar. She accepts. They sit silently, calmly, politely, sipping their coffee, until they are done; she even smiles, just a little. Then, glancing at her watch, the woman realizes that it’s time to go, and rushes off to her train.

Halfway to the track she stops mid-step: it dawns on her that she forgot her packages in the lunch room. She races back, hoping that they have not been stolen too. She finds the spot where she and the man had dined; no packages. Her heart sinks. But then ... then, in the corner of her eye, she sees them ... in the next booth ... her packages, intact ... and on the table sits her salad, untouched. The salad she had eaten was not her own. The stranger had shared his meal with her; *he* had given *her* a place at the table.

Instead of accepting that life’s opportunities are like a banquet offered only to a chosen few, where guests are honored by their status, Jesus shows us a different way. Do not be concerned with your position, but take on an attitude of humility. Do not include only those who already enjoy

life's benefits, but extend yourself to those who are most in need. Above all, do not consider God's blessings a zero-sum game, but instead, imagine them as a joyful feast, where two loaves and five fish can feed 5,000 ... where vats of water can be turned into barrels of fine wine, where a mustard seed can grow and yield thirty-fold, and sixty-fold, and a hundred-fold. There is *enough*, Christ shows us – enough love, enough food, enough dignity, enough grace for *every single child of God in this world*. Enough grace for you, and for me; enough grace for every child of God, to whom Christ beckons, “Friend, come up higher.”

Amen.



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