

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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As we read the gospels, it becomes clear Jesus had no standards about his dinner companions. People noticed and complained about the fact that he ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes – all sorts of unsuitable people! Yet in today’s gospel story, Jesus is at a proper dinner with proper company – he’s having a Sabbath meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. Keep in mind the Pharisees were the good people of their day. They never missed a religious meeting, they studied the Scriptures, they tithed, they set the moral standard for their culture. We would consider them faithful, active church members today. Jesus is at the ancient equivalent to our “Dinners for Eight” and there is not a prostitute in sight!

Jesus takes the opportunity to comment on the behavior of his host and the other guests. He notices how everyone is moving their place cards around to sit closer to the head table. Don’t shove yourself forward like that, Jesus admonishes, you only risk embarrassing yourself. Jesus’ advice, although helpful, cannot be the point of the parable. As biblical scholar, N.T. Wright, astutely observes, “Jesus did not come to give us good advice.” There must be more to this passage because a meal is never just a simple meal for Luke. In Luke’s Gospel, meal times provide an opportunity to teach about God’s character and actions. The Kingdom of God is often apparent at meal times and this meal is no exception. Jesus uses the opportunity to describe God’s heavenly banquet, one which will include everyone, not just the wealthy and friends and relatives, but also the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

Jesus directs instructions to his host that are meant for us all, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends 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.” (v.12-14)

Jesus is not condemning socializing among family and friends, after all, he enjoyed dinners at the home of his friends Peter, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Eating with friends is one of the joys of life. He is saying, however, that extending hospitality or kindness just to our friends is no special merit. As he said in his Sermon on the Plain earlier in this gospel, "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same." (Lk 6: 33) In other words, when making a guest list do not go for reciprocity. Do not just invite those who can return the favor – where is the generosity, the grace in that? Invite people who would never expect to be invited, people who could never repay the hospitality, people who could really use a good dinner, "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." They go by different names these days, but Jesus is speaking about people on the margins of society. "You will be blessed," Jesus says, intimating more immediate blessings as well as a reward in heaven.

What would happen if we included at our dinner table "those who do not take an invitation for granted?" Would we catch a glimpse of the way things will be in the kingdom of God--not because we condescended to welcome those "beneath" us--but because we understand Jesus redefines honorable behavior and honored guests?

What would people think if we took Jesus' message to heart, if we actually invited people on the margins of society to sit at our dinner tables and began to spend time with them? What would our children or spouses think?

I recently read about a wealthy woman in New York City who invited persons to her table marginalized in society. In a *New York Times* article, "Angels in America," Frank Rich wrote about the recent death of a prosperous, prominent woman--Judith Dunnington Peabody. Certainly, Mrs. Peabody enjoyed the highest place at the tables she graced, and we might think she was one of those people who chose to remain in her own circle of privilege and comfort. Yet articles about Mrs. Peabody's life reveal a woman who deeply understood what it means to be a blessing, and what it means to love the strangers in our lives, not from afar, but sitting right down next to them.

In addition to the traditional fundraising (among her "own") that most society matrons engage in, Judith Peabody worked with and for those in need, those whom most folks would have avoided, including a Hispanic youth gang in East Harlem. "One night she invited all the gang members to dinner at our apartment," her husband recalled. "The doormen were, well, a little surprised. It was a great night."

Mrs. Peabody understood and followed Jesus' instructions about whom to invite to your table. She demonstrated hospitality, along with courage, as she worked during the 1980's as a caregiver for gay men with HIV/AIDS, while others stayed away out of fear. "There was this constant with her of consoling and holding people's hands," a friend remembered. When asked to describe what made Mrs. Peabody so unusual and an inspiration one friend replied, "That the people in her particular village were 'the most marginalized,' and often those furthest from her own milieu of 'incredible social privilege' was what set her apart." Another friend's comment echoes Jesus' advice to the dinner host in today's scripture, "What made her different was she was always going into areas where polite society didn't go....Friends of hers would tell her: "I can't believe you're doing that. We don't know people like that."

Mrs. Peabody demonstrated how behavior fitting for the Kingdom of God affects dinner invitations now. She invited the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind to her table and into her life. She already experienced what God's heavenly banquet, a banquet at which everyone is invited, will be like.

I offer one more image of God's heavenly banquet. It was portrayed in one of the most theological films Hollywood ever made, "Places in the Heart."

The film is set in Texas during the 1930s and demonstrates survival in the face of very difficult circumstances. Sally Field's husband in the movie, the sheriff, was accidentally shot to death by an inebriated African American teenager. Now widowed with two small children, she takes in boarders to help make ends meet on her dirt poor farm. Her two boarders are a blind man, played by John Malkovich, and an African-American man, played by Danny Glover. Glover is also her farm hand and farm manager and faces overt racism from Field's white racist neighbors.

The final scene takes place in church during Holy Communion. As Communion is passed, the camera pans the congregation one row at a time. Members of the band who played at the Saturday night dance. A woman killed during a tornado earlier in the movie. She's supposed to be dead, how is she there? Moses, the African-American field hand sits beside his white friend, Mr. Wills. The camera focuses on Sally Field's deceased husband as he passes communion and says, "The peace of Christ be with you" to the young boy who killed him. The scene--which began as a worship service in the 1930's--has become an image of the heavenly banquet.

Pictured around Sally Field's character are all the people who are and have been important in her life, those both living and dead. It is a portrait of the heavenly banquet, the communion of saints, if ever there was one.

Jesus describes God's heavenly banquet as one which will include everyone, not just the wealthy and friends and relatives, but also the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. That is who God invites to dinner. That is who God chooses to hang out with. What about all of us who claim to follow God's lead? Who will we invite to our dinner tables? Who will we spend time with?

Who is coming to dinner? Will our answers please God?
Amen.