

“How to Give a Dinner Party”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 12, Proper 17, Lectionary 22

Text: Luke 14: 1, 7–14

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Grace to you, and peace, from God, Fountain of Living Water, and from Christ Jesus, who shows hospitality to strangers. AMEN

I have a question for you: How many of you, after hearing today’s Gospel lesson, would ever dream of inviting Jesus to one of your parties?? Man, oh man! First off, even though he himself is a guest, he manages to insult all the other guests by delivering a Miss Manners-style lecture about the fact that they are tripping over one another to take the best seats in the dining room. And then he delivers a stinging critique of the guest list to his host, pretty much slamming him for inviting people to the party who are just like him, or who can do him some good socially. I just keep trying to picture the poor host...and they didn’t even have a baseball team that he could switch the topic of conversation to when the stunned silence starts! “Um, thanks for the advice, Jesus. How about those Cubs, huh? Could someone pass the hummus?”

We like to think of Jesus as the sweet, polite fellow who sits and smiles at everybody, in between healings. We like the Jesus who listens to all our problems, tells us we’re good people, and easily forgives us for everything we do. We like the Jesus who is always on our side, who blesses everything we do, who never says a disparaging word, who lets us be just who we are, requiring no change, who answers all our prayers just as we ask them. This is the popular Jesus, and we love him. He just makes us feel so...*good* about ourselves!

But let’s face it: Jesus could also make people downright uncomfortable. He could be out and out offensive. There’s a reason people wanted to kill him. And despite our best efforts to domesticate him, to make him a nice, Miss Manners kind of feel-good teacher whose primary purpose is to teach us proper etiquette toward one another, Jesus can—and should—offend us right down where we live. This is the Jesus who was so offending his contemporaries that the gospel lesson tells us that he got invited to this dinner because they were watching him closely...they were trying to catch him in being offensive. And he obliged them.

We don’t grasp right away just how offensive Jesus is being. Our dinner parties today don’t carry quite as much baggage as the ones in Jesus’ day. In that society, dinners or banquets were the primary means of upholding the social order. You invited to come dine at your home folks who were slightly above your own social status, or very slightly below your own social status. That way you could repay and benefit from those more powerful than yourself, and you could obligate those less powerful than yourself. But if you invited folks too far below your status, then you appeared to have no status. What good could those folks possibly do you? There was a tightly orchestrated reciprocity at work, and the entire organization of the society was based on it. Maybe we aren’t that different—we just don’t show it by having dinner parties anymore. But we do like to hang out with those who are just like us, don’t we, or with those we would like to be like? But Jesus turns all of their notion about who is in and who is out, about who matters and who doesn’t, on its head. Part of the problem is that we are a bit removed from the context of that culture...but the biggest part of the problem, I think, is that we really don’t very much like what Jesus is saying.

We protest, “Oh, of course I believe what Jesus is saying. That’s a very practical suggestion about taking the lower place so that you can be given greater honor. Of course, we should practice humility. Good advice. Sounds very Christian. And of course, we should do good things for poor people and people with handicaps. I gave some money to a fireman collecting at an intersection just the other day.” Or else we spiritualize Jesus’ words and say that this will be wonderful, and we will all banquet together finally when we get to heaven, when those barriers will be eliminated.

But do we really believe Jesus? Or have we just managed to make ourselves feel better about it? Look around us. We’ve come here to a banquet, a feast at this table, a party. But have we truly invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, all those on the margins, and given them places of honor in our worshiping community? Or are we still wanting to invite only people who are just like us?

I was in a congregation once where we were having an all-congregation visioning workshop, talking about what ministries we were going to do, talking about evangelism, and how we could increase the number of disciples in our community of faith, which wasn’t too much larger than this one. The congregation was in a rapidly gentrifying urban neighborhood, though there were still homeless folks on most every street corner, begging outside condo buildings where the cheapest apartments started at \$750,000. And this particular

congregation was already heavily involved in ministry to homeless folks. One woman suggested that we needed to be inviting our homeless neighbors to join us. But another person spoke up, and said, “No, we need to be inviting the folks living in these condos. They’re the ones who are going to be able to make the cash donations that will keep this place running financially.” In that moment, part of me wanted to agree with him...and then I realized that I was not using “kingdom thinking.” Kingdom thinking turns that kind of thinking on its head. Kingdom thinking says that it is by inviting those to the party who *cannot* benefit us that we will find blessing. Now, were there folks in those condos who were poor spiritually, who were blinded in their own way? Absolutely. But that’s not why we wanted to invite them. We were wanting to invite them because of what they could do for us...and because they were more like us than the homeless folks, we thought. But Jesus says to us that the party is for those who can bring us no advantage. The party is for those we would least imagine inviting.

One of the books that has had a great impact on my spiritual life is Tony Campolo’s book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. In it, he describes arriving in Honolulu terribly jetlagged, wandering the streets at 3 AM trying to find a place to eat breakfast. He stumbled on a greasy spoon diner, and as he began to look at the menu, in walked a group of seven or eight sex workers who took the seats around him at the counter. One of the women, Agnes, announced to the others that the next day was her birthday. One of the other women nastily said to her, “What do you want? A birthday party? A cake?” Agnes was hurt, and revealed that she had never had a birthday party in her life. After the women left, Pr. Campolo asked the owner if the women came there every night, and was told that they did. Between the two of them, they hatched a plan to give her a party the next night, complete with cake. Now, the owner had no idea that this man was a pastor, or a person of faith. When the women walked in at 3:30 the next morning, Agnes was flabbergasted, and so touched that she asked if she could take the cake home for awhile before they cut it, so that she could show it to others. She walked out carrying the cake, and Pr. Campolo, in the silence, offered a prayer for her. At the end of the prayer, the owner said with some shock, “What are you, some kind of preacher? What kind of church do you belong to?” And Tony Campolo answered, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.” Can we be that kind of church?

I delight every time we have Café Immanuel, because for me, it is a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God is supposed to be. We extend the invitation to anyone and everyone, without distinction. Many of the guests who come are people who cannot repay us for the meal. The diversity around the tables is astonishing—and refreshing. We seat everyone at a place of honor, and serve them as honored guests...no Styrofoam plates, no plastic forks, but real dishes, real flatware. There is no line where people shuffle along having scrambled eggs dished out. Instead, food is brought to a tablecloth-draped table and placed in front of a true guest. And often, Immanuel folks will make a point to show hospitality by sitting beside our guests and engaging in table talk. Isn’t that what you would do in your own home? And in doing so, by offering hospitality to strangers, I am convinced that we are welcoming angels without realizing it. The Kingdom of God is visibly present among us when we offer lavish, welcoming hospitality. If we want to grow the Kingdom in our corner of Evanston, I deeply believe that hospitality to the stranger will be the greatest sources of blessing.

You see, the Kingdom of God is a party. Jesus is inviting everyone to a banquet, to a party. You and I are guests who have gotten here early. But we are also servants at the banquet. And the host of the banquet sends us out to invite the other guests with explicit instructions to look for them in the least likely places. Jesus tells us to invite everyone, but we are to give priority to inviting those we are least inclined to invite. There is a place at this table for everyone, from the most innocent of babies to those who have lived the hardest of lives. There is welcome for all at this table... the poor, the crippled, the blind...and yes, there is room also for the proud, the rich, the self-satisfied. There are no places of honor to struggle for, because we all come here claiming nothing other than the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Come to the banquet, for all is now ready! Thanks be to God. AMEN