

Beggars' Banquet

Preached FCCW, September 1, 2019

Text Luke 14:1, 7-14

Jesus had been invited to attend a banquet at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. These very upstanding religious leaders were watching Jesus closely, as if they expected him to step out of line in some way.

For the life of me, I can't understand why they kept inviting him to these dinners in the first place. Reading about their repeated attempts to expose Jesus as a phony is painfully similar to watching Wile E. Coyote's endless attempts to get rid of Roadrunner. No matter how carefully the trap appears to be set—with a "BEEP! BEEP!"--the anvil intended for his nemesis always ends up landing on the coyote's head instead.

At this particular party, Jesus was also watching carefully as the guests arrived. In Jesus' time, where you sat at a banquet was a good indicator of your social standing. The closer you sat to the host, the more important you were. Only, Jesus did not seem to be impressed with those who scrambled to claim the best seats for themselves. Jesus warned his disciples *not* to follow their example. He warned that, if you rush to take the best seats in order to be treated as a VIP, you might end up being publicly humiliated by having to surrender your seat to another, more important guest. But if you humbly take one of the lower seats, the host might call you forward in a way that will confer honor upon you in front of the whole assembly. What really mattered was not which seat you chose for yourself, but the place at the table that your host chose for you. This was more than a lesson in proper party etiquette. It was a parable. In other words, it was meant to be a lesson for all of life.

We have our own ways of claiming our seat at the table of recognition. What we drive, where we live, who we know, all announce our importance to the world; and maybe even reassures ourselves that we matter. Jesus reminds us that true honor is not obtained through manipulating others' opinions of us, like the guests who compete for the choicest seats and the prestige that comes with them. Our place in God's seating plan is not based on how great we are, but on how great God is. When we understand that God's favor is given, not earned; we can better accept ourselves with all our imperfections. Which usually makes it easier to accept others where *they* are at, without comparing ourselves to them in order to feel better about ourselves.

That's the other side of this parable. Jesus not only had a word to say about how to be a humble guest; he also had something to say about being a gracious host. He said, "When you give a party, don't invite the people who will repay you by inviting you to their house. Instead, invite the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind." In other words, the very people who can never, ever repay you.

Applying that advice to life begins with the understanding that when Jesus speaks about the poor, blind, crippled and lame, he is not just talking about those who have been denied a place at the table of good fortune. He is talking about us, too! Everyone suffers from some level of poverty of spirit; some degree of blindness when it comes to what God wants us to notice in life. All of us are crippled and lame; if not physically, then emotionally and spiritually. If we can come to accept those conditions in ourselves, we can learn to accept them in our neighbor.

Author and activist Shane Claiborne has said that the gospel is good news for those who are broken and disturbing news for those who think they've got it all together. Some of us have been told all our lives that we are wretched, but the gospel reminds us that we are beautiful. Others of us have been told our whole lives that we are beautiful, but the gospel reminds us that we are also wretched. The church was never meant to be a place where we can fool everyone into believing we have it all together. But it can be a place where we are enabled to humbly admit how broken we are, and everyone will nod in agreement because they can admit it about themselves, too. And then we can remind each other that, seen through the lens of grace, we are all also beautiful.

That kind of talk can ruin the party for people who only want to hide their insecurity beneath robes of carefully composed self-righteousness. But it can be liberating for those who hear their name called to come forward to a place of honor they never expected.

Jesus teaches some of his most important lessons at banquet tables like the one in this story. Or, like the one in this sanctuary. Whenever we gather at the Lord's table, as we are doing this morning, we should remember that we are here only by invitation from the greatest host of all. *We* are the lame, the poor, the crippled, and the blind. If we are feeling entitled to be on the guest list, we are reminded that we are broken, and that our brokenness can make us pretty wretched to one another, now and then. Yet it is also here that, despite our brokenness, we are reminded that we are beautiful and welcome.

So, come to this sacred table; to this beggars' banquet.

A place has been reserved, just for you.

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