

Sermon for Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 17
September 1, 2019; Church of the Ascension, Chicago
Rev. Dr. Robert Petite, Assisting Priest

“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed.” Luke 14:13

I think we can sometimes underestimate the occasions in our lives when many of our most common activities are awash with symbols and rituals of profound significance.

We take for granted the polite gesture of shaking someone’s hand the first time we meet them. I wonder how many of us are aware that the common handshake is a sign that we are not carrying a weapon, that we come in peace.

There is nothing so rich in symbol and ritual than a formal dinner party. I was invited to a wonderful dinner party several days ago, to a meal that was full of the richness of symbol and ritual – cocktails and conversation before dinner, a beautifully laid table with all of the essential esthetics and table utensils, and a multi-course dinner consisting of a menu fit for royalty. Even the seating at the table spoke of the value placed on ritual and symbol as our host sat at the head of the table, and yours truly, the local respected clergyperson, was seated at the other end of the table.

It was a very enjoyable experience, a time full of good conversation, an expression of respect and affection for all the guests who had gathered to enjoy a sumptuous meal and one another’s company.

In this morning’s Gospel reading from Luke we meet Jesus as he attends a dinner party packed with ritual and symbolism. Jesus has been invited to dine with a group of pharisees, a sign in itself of the respect and honor these important people of the religious community bestowed on him.

However, unlike the meal in which I attended, where there was mutual respect and affection, the Pharisees are watching Jesus very closely. The original Greek text implies a watching characterized by a *‘hostile observation’*.

It was no doubt this experience of a *‘hostile observation’* that motivated Jesus to tell a story that would undermine all the social conventions held by those in attendance at this dinner party.

Jesus lived in an honor-shame based culture that was intensely sensitive to status and recognition. There was a correct order of seating and the dinner etiquette was characterized by very particular cultural norms.

At this point, it is important that we notice that the story Jesus tells is a parable. In the Scriptures parables are often characterized by verbal exaggeration and the deliberate use of absurdity.

For example, it was completely absurd and extremely bad manners for Jesus to tell his host and those gathered, how to conduct themselves at a dinner party to which he was an invited guest. Such advice is insulting and even shocking.

The parables of Jesus shock most of the time. The shock serves as a way to get our attention. Parables serve as a kind of wake-up call and ask deeply challenging questions of us, like: "Who am I in this story?"

At face value the story looks like a piece of practical advice on how to behave at a dinner party so as to avoid embarrassment. Take the low seat that the host may invite you higher.

If we simply receive the story in this way, Jesus seems to be encouraging a kind of false humility that values personal exultation. But remember, we are dealing with a parable, a wake-up story. As we take a closer look, we will find something deeper and more challenging.

Could it be that Jesus is mocking the social norms of his time, by his extraordinary and unsolicited advice on social etiquette?

We might begin looking for this broader and more radical meaning of what Jesus is offering this morning if we keep in mind that the writer of Luke is at heart an historian, an historian who believes that Jesus is initiating a new historic reality, a kind of upside-down kingdom, in which the first are last and the last are first. For Luke, Jesus is an historic revolutionary who brings radical social change.

Notice as Jesus begins to offer his rude advice to the gathered company, that he broadens the social context from a select and privileged group of guests to a story about a wedding feast, a larger and more inclusive community meal, a meal that is a sign and symbol of the Messianic Banquet. Luke wants us to know that Jesus is about to offer something more universal, something shocking that will upset the norms of the pharisaic community. The standards of the Messianic Meal are in direct contradiction with the mores that Jesus appears to be mocking.

The real punch of the story, the core of the parable, arrives without warning as Jesus shifts dramatically from the norms of the pharisaic community to the norms of the Messianic Banquet.

"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 14:12.

Here is the surprise, the absurd, that announces the parable is not simply a piece of practical wisdom, but rather signals, contrary to the social norms of privilege and social status, the new norms of this new upside-down Kingdom of God.

That Jesus begins his challenge of the pharisees by setting up a story that begins with a wedding feast is a wonderful advance clue that he is really referencing a reality beyond this present dinner at which he is a suspect guest.

Jesus is inviting the pharisees, and by implication you and me, to a messianic banquet, the norms of which are in complete contradiction to the culture norms of Jesus' own time and our own.

The invitation to this meal is not founded upon social status and cultural privilege. The only way to respond to this invitation is to renounce any claim of our own, and to accept the invitation as an unmerited gift.

To accept this gift is to practice a true humility, a humility, that like faith itself is not a passive virtue, but the day by day exercise of the Christian pilgrimage by which we make progress through God's loving grace. This humility, like faith, involves letting go of self-promotion and allowing God to do what we by ourselves cannot do. It is a sense of ourselves as distinctive and individual, yet a self-engaged in a giving of ourselves to others, while simultaneously receiving from others.

The final section of this morning's parable would have been immediately recognizable by Luke's own Christian community as a archetype for the Eucharistic meal that made up such an important part of the early Church, a meal that became representative of Christian life and identity. *"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind"*.

The Eucharist is the true wedding feast, the supper of the lamb. All of us have received an invitation to this banquet through our baptismal covenant. Here is the true and living bread who takes away the sins of the world and is offered to you and to me. Everyone is invited. There will be no reason to choose a particular seat, (so let go of your favorite pew.). For no matter where we sit, we shall lack nothing either in status or place.