

The Rev. Luke Selles

Proper 17, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

31 August 2025

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is at table as the guest of an unnamed leader of the Pharisees, likely an important person in the religious community, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, for a Sabbath meal. And here he wryly observes and takes the opportunity to teach all the guests how to be a guest, commenting on how they each have chosen for themselves the seats of greatest honor. And then he turns to his host and tells him in future not to “invite your friends or your brothers, or your relatives, or your rich neighbors,” but “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” implying that the host has chosen guests that suit his own agenda.

Two aspects of this text may trouble us: why Jesus here, and elsewhere, goes after the Pharisees; and the ableist language that Jesus uses. The Pharisees were a diverse, widespread movement, which sought to preserve Jewish culture in the midst of Roman society. Meaning “separated,” Pharisees taught the holiness of the Torah, the written law and took on an additional oral law to ensure that the divine law was never broken. They worshipped in synagogues and were the spiritual ancestors of Rabbinical Judaism. We are told at the beginning of this passage that the Pharisees were watching him closely.

This makes sense because in Luke’s narrative, the last time Jesus ate a meal with the Pharisees he critiqued those present harshly, accusing them of emphasizing purity over Justice and for “seeking out seats of honor,” which he again does here. Because of this, the Pharisees were rightfully on their guard around Jesus. Many scholars now understand Jesus himself to have been a Pharisee, part of their movement, and his critiques to have been ones he made from within their ranks, mostly directed at those in leadership who, like the host in today’s lesson, were of a higher social class than the majority of Jews in the Empire who worshipped in synagogues. Certainly of a higher class than Jesus, the son of a carpenter from a backwater town in Nazareth.

The ableist language here that Jesus uses may startle and discomfit us. In first century society, disabled folks were social outcasts and made fully dependent on the charity of others, especially if they had no family. While disabled folks are generally more included and supported in this society because of the tireless work of disabled activists and their allies, unfortunately the stigma continues and the societal and structural support is tenuous.

Jesus in this parable as in all his parables is teaching the leaders of the Pharisees and us about the Kingdom of God, the new divine order he was ushering in. In this parable, he is taking the first century honor system as it was manifested in the societal niceties around meals, and turning it upside down.

For Jesus, the act of sharing food was itself sacred. Eating was a daily reminder that all food, grown from the Earth, God's Creation, was from the hand of God. And at every table in which we invite those who are not like us to share with us, God promises to be there. We are about to gather at this table, ask God to bless a meal, and to share with us all a taste of the heavenly banquet, the table set for all. When we look around this room, we may not have chosen these people, but God has chosen them for us. St. Martin's, as we go out into our communities this week and in the weeks to come, let us consider: who are we inviting to eat with us? Amen.