

## **“Dinner Guests”**

Liturgical Date: Proper 17 C

Primary Text: St. Luke 14:1-14

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Luke, the 14th chapter. We see some of the themes of the Gospel of Luke on prominent display in our text today: the welcoming of outsiders (meaning Gentiles) into the Kingdom of God, the “Great Reversal” where those people and events that seem the least worthy are elevated, and finally this is the 6<sup>th</sup> of 9 meals in Luke showing “Table Fellowship.” Today we see Jesus as the guest at a meal who teaches about guests at meal, as the title of today’s sermon is “Dinner Guests”. **JESUS TEACHES US ABOUT MERCY AND HUMILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF FEASTING SO THAT WE MAY BE INVITED TO “MOVE UP HIGHER”.**

Sharing a meal with someone is a special thing. In the New Testament times it was even a bigger deal as sitting down to “break bread” with someone indicated a fellowship, an agreement, an accepting of that person. While inviting someone to a meal may not carry the weight today that it did in the New Testament times, it certainly is significant. Especially when you invite a person or people to eat with you in your home. You are opening the place where you live your life, one of your most personal possessions and places to someone else and perhaps sharing one of your culinary specialties. Generally those that we would invite for a special meal in our homes are extended family, close friends, or a person that we genuinely want to get to know better.

In St. Luke 14 Jesus is extended and accepts an invitation to a meal in someone's home. This was an important person in society as the Bible tells us in verse 1 that the host was "a ruler of the Pharisees." However, this was not an invitation to try to understand Jesus more or borne out of genuine hospitality. It was, in effect, a trap. As they often did, the religious leaders wanted to Jesus to do or say something to where they could obtain a "gotcha" moment saying that He was teaching or acting against Jewish law and tradition. Verse 2 says about Jesus that they "were watching him carefully."

Well, it doesn't take long before Jesus the dinner guest has a chance to do something that will irritate them. In fact, the episode involves a feud that has been ongoing between Jesus and the Pharisees: healing people on the Sabbath. This has come up before, including in Luke Chapter 6 and in just the previous chapter (13). Here a man with dropsy shows up-you have to wonder if this was just random or he was specifically invited there by the Pharisees to see if Jesus would do it again. Dropsy is a condition known today as edema where the body is retaining fluids and thus swelling. It indicates lung, liver, and kidney problems. Jesus heals the man and sends him on his way.

In most cultures and contexts, this would be a cause of rejoicing. A man with a serious condition has been healed. What's the problem? It was the Sabbath and the Pharisees had developed a complicated system of rules and regulations concerning it. Healing people was considered work and in their eyes, this should not be done. But Jesus, of course, is ready for them. In verse 5 Jesus asks, "*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?*" The Pharisees are silenced by the words of their dinner guest.

The point here is that the Sabbath is supposed to be a good thing! It provides the body much needed rest and time to gather to worship God by preserving one day a week to rest from work. God intended this to be a blessing to His people, but the Pharisees had inserted so much legalism into it, that it had become a burden. How else would explain it being controversial to even think for a moment that it would somehow wrong to heal someone on a Saturday? Luther said this, *“For God does not want the Sabbath kept so holy that we should forsake our neighbor in his trouble. Therefore if I serve my neighbor and help him, though it means work, I have kept the Sabbath rightly and well; for I have performed a divine work on it.”*

In our modern American society, what is a business that is known for taking the Sabbath seriously? Chick Fil A of course! Even though they may be losing out on up to billion dollars of profit a year by doing so they close all of their restaurants on Sundays. Why? This is a testimony to their Christian faith and they believe it is beneficial to their employees to have one day where they can rest and not have to worry about work conflicting with worship and family activities. Do they see it a legalistic command that is somehow earning favor with God? No. Did you know that there have actually been special cases where local Chick Fil A’s have opened on Sundays? In 2016 after the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, they opened to prepare food for first responders and people donating blood (so much for the false narrative that they “hate” gay people). When Hurricane Florence battered North Carolina in 2018, they opened to serve people impacted by the storm and donated 500 sandwiches and 1,200 nuggets to people staying in Red Cross shelters. So we must understand that keeping the Sabbath rightly sometimes involves doing things that would be

considered work, if it is for the greater good. Jesus is trying to teach His dinner hosts this.

But the dinner guest is not done yet, not by a long shot. After this dramatic demonstration of His healing power and showing the foolishness of their legalistic Sabbath rules, in verse 7 He begins to tell them a parable. The parable also involves a meal, this time a wedding feast. Jesus also tells other parables involving great feasts and the feasts represent the Kingdom of God. And in this parable, He focuses in on where you should sit. Again, we have some sense of the “head table” today at formal gatherings but it was even a bigger deal in First Century Israel. If you were invited to a wedding and sat down in too good of a seat, you could be asked to move when a more “important” guest arrived. And just like today, the “movers and shakers” often arrived “fashionably late.” It would be pretty embarrassing to have to move. Kind of like if visit a church, sit down in a pew, and then get a tap on the shoulder and member of that church tells you to move from “their” pew. (Please don’t do that here! I know cases where this has really happened at other churches.)

So what does Jesus say one should do when they go to feast? Sit in the lower position and wait for the host to say, “*Friend, move up higher.*” (v10). Remember whom Jesus is talking to, who has invited Him to dinner. It is a ruler of the Pharisees. The Pharisees would be the very people who want the best seats and expect to get them if they arrived late. They are the people tapping you on the shoulder, pointing, and telling you move.

And Jesus is not providing only a practical etiquette lesson for dinner parties here. Jesus is teaching humility. One of the great principles of the Bible, that you can find in numerous other verses and passages as well, is laid out for us in verse 11 from the very mouth of Jesus, “*For everyone who*

*exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

This is “law to the proud, grace to the humble.” Read through the Gospels and you see this is how Jesus interacts with people. Those that come to Him proud, self-righteous, opposing Him get rebuke-often in very strong words. But those that approach Him humbly, recognizes their sin receive grace and mercy. Grasp this and read the Gospels and I promise you it is plain as day.

And it is not only a principle for the Bible times, but for today. Those who think they don't sin or that their sin isn't a “big deal” or that their good works will somehow cover their shortcomings, need to tremble before the thundering of God's Law. But when we are contrite, we acknowledge our sin and our depravity and the futility of our works we receive God's grace. When we confess and believe that we are truly “by nature sinful and unclean, that we have sinned again God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone, that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves and that we justly deserve God's present and eternal punishment” then we here those comforting words that “God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives all your sins”.

And Jesus is not done quite yet. Now the dinner guest is going to speak about who should be the dinner guests at the feast (and He will expand on this more later in Chapter 14 as well). The obvious people you want to invite are your friends and family-people you like. Or you may want to invite rich neighbors. Hey, they might give the best wedding gifts, right? When politicians hold fundraising dinners they invite people who can plop down big donations for obvious reasons. Again, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees-they are the people who would expect to be invited to big feasts-to be the guests of honor. And if they threw a party, then these are the people they would invite-people like them, well-heeled and connected. But are

these the type of people that God invites to His feast? People who attempt to “repay” Him with good works and donations? No.

Jesus says in verse 13, “*But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*”, people who could never repay you.

Remember that the feast represents God’s Kingdom and the host of the feast is God Himself. Woe unto us if we think we deserve to be in the feast by what we can repay God with. He doesn’t need our good works or money. It’s all His anyway.

In February 2017 a man named Meir Kay prepared to go to Super Bowl Party at a fancy 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue venue. He brought a few guests with him. They were four homeless men that he just invited off the street. People that obviously would not be on the normal guest list for such an event. He bought them jerseys, food, and drink. And they had a great time. If you haven’t seen this, just google “throwing a Super Bowl Party for the Homeless” and if after 4 minutes your heart is not touched you might want to check your pulse. The men he brought could not repay him with anything but their gratitude. And one thing that struck me is that before they ate their food at this party, the homeless men stopped, bowed their heads, and prayed. Now of course good works like this don’t earn us a spot in heaven, but this illustrates as Luther said, “*God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does.*”

As that great hymn of faith, *Rock of Ages* puts so well, “*Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.*” Luther in preaching on this text said, “*The sum of the Gospel then is: Love and necessity control all law; and there should be no law that cannot be enforced and applied in love. If it cannot, then let it be done away with.*”

And here is the good news: God invites us poor, blind, and lowly sinners to His feast! We come and sit at an out-of-the-way table in the back, but He says “*Friend, come up higher.*” (repeat) Isn’t that awesome! Our Creator, Lord, and Master calls us “friend” and invites us up to the head table to feast with Him. Even though we could never repay Him nor offer a gift approaching what He has done. He has paid it all and given it all. In Jesus, we are invited to have table fellowship and dine and live eternally with Him.

And we get to continually do this, as we will today, unworthy guest made worthy by Him-feasting with the Lord at His Supper. Receiving His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins at the Lord’s Table. Communing with Him. Hearing “*Take, eat; this is the true body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given into death for your sins*” and “*Take, drink; this is the true blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, shed for the forgiveness of your sins.*”

Jesus was the dinner guest that day in the home of a Pharisee. But the guest becomes the host. And as the host of the eternal feast of heaven, He invites us lowly-but repentant-sinners to receive faith, life, and salvation. Friend, move up higher!

Amen.