

Hebrews 13:1-3

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ²Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Luke 14 New International Version (NIV)

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ²There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. ³Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" ⁴But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.

⁵Then he asked them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?" ⁶And they had nothing to say.

⁷When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹²Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

PRAY

You are cordially invited... The honor of your presence is requested. Isn't it a good feeling to be invited to a party? Usually.

But it can raise questions:

What shall I wear? (Is this a formal or informal occasion?)

Will I know anyone else in attendance? Who will be present?
Where shall I sit?

Depending on the occasion, there might be assigned seating. The host/hostess or their designee may escort you to the proper table or the right seat.

Perhaps some of you became fans of *Downton Abbey*, a PBS historical drama series that focuses on the fictional life and times of the aristocratic Lord Grantham and his family during the early 20th century in England; a time in which values and society are rapidly changing. Polite society held to strict roles and rules. Crossing those invisible boundaries constituted an appalling breach of manners. After serving the family and guests upstairs, the servants could gather and eat at their table downstairs. Guests of Lord Grantham were seated according to strict rules as well, the men and the women were expected to comply with specific sex related roles as well. Everyone knew their place. Things progressed swimmingly as long as everyone complied with these unwritten rules of etiquette. All it took was for one person to act contrary to these rules of engagement, to create a crisis (of sorts.)

Similarly, during the era in which Jesus lived, there were also clear delineations of class and sex within society, which implicitly dictated one's place. People within this honor/shame-based culture would be careful to "stay in their lane" and comply with expectations.

But Jesus consistently acted in ways that crossed these boundaries and stirred things up. For instance: Jesus lived with, ate with, and associated with those who were socially ostracized (Matthew 9:13). He consistently engaged with and treated women with respect and dignity, resisting the sexism of his culture (John 4:27). He gave children the same kind of attention, in a society that did not value them (Luke 18:15); likewise he resisted racism woven in his culture, as well claiming that God loves Gentiles as much as Jews (Luke 10:26ff, Luke 4:25-27).

Jesus touched the untouchables/lepers (Mark 1:4, Luke 5:13) and gave clear instructions to his disciples regarding the treatment of the poor in their midst. He demonstrated true justice through his treatment of the hated tax collectors (who were agents of the oppressors/Rome). These are only a few of countless examples of how Jesus acted justly and demonstrated right relationships ("righteousness").

Today we are invited to a dinner party on the Sabbath, along with Jesus, at the home of a prominent Pharisee. Jesus is being watched; "surveilled" (v. 1) would be an

accurate translation. The Pharisees have their eyes on him. In fact, it could be that the man with edema is a “plant”, someone purposely invited in order to set Jesus up: Will Jesus heal on the Sabbath or not?

The law prescribed that anything that could wait until the next day, should wait; otherwise it constitutes “work” and that would break the Sabbath. Jesus raises the question with the Pharisees who are present, but they give him the silent treatment, not once but twice.

What does Jesus do? He heals the man. If it is lawful to pull one’s child or ox out of a well on the Sabbath, then Jesus takes this as “permission” to heal on the Sabbath as well. The Pharisees appear indifferent, Jesus is compassionate. The Pharisees live by the letter of the law or what is permitted; Jesus lives by the intention of the law, responding with compassion to human need, by healing and releasing the man of disease.

Next, we observe an interesting episode of first century etiquette. Or perhaps it is something else?! Jesus notices how the guests are behaving and via the use of a parable, gives some advice on humility. Social pecking order, if you will, is illustrated by proximity to or distance from the host. The seat of honor at such a banquet is nearest the host. To escape the humiliation of being “demoted” and asked to move, Jesus recommends taking a seat far from the host. That way, if you are invited to move closer, one is honored in so doing.

Jesus is warning against self-promotion. In Jesus’ mind, this was the primary problem of the Pharisees. It is the host, not the guests, who determine the seating arrangement. The setting of a wedding banquet is suggestive that God is the host, the one who calls us into relationship and will honor faithful disciples at the great heavenly banquet.

The key verse is v.11: *“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Based on this advice, I do not see people rushing for the worst seats in hopes of being elevated to the better seats. Rather, if we possess a sense of self that is in tune with Jesus’ heart of compassion and servanthood, we will want others to be seated first and near to the host. We will gladly accept whatever seat may remain after all others have been seated.

Next Jesus attention turns from the guests to the host, and what can be called the “rule of reciprocity”. Then as now, often people are invited in the hopes that they will reciprocate. If I invite a prominent citizen to my home for an event, it is expected that they in turn, will invite me to their home. Who is on the guest list depends on the host’s motives? Jesus turns the tables on this - no pun intended!

Jesus advises those who would be hosts - who would normally invite friends, relatives, or well-off neighbors (v.12) to change things up! We are to invite those who are the least likely guests: *“the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind”* (v.13). *Why invite these?*

Perhaps, as my ten-year-old granddaughter said after she spontaneously gave her hard earned \$10. to a man on the street corner: “I think he needs that more than I do.” Perhaps the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind are in greater need and will appreciate the meal more than my less needy friend or relative. But more to the point, *they likely will not* be able to reciprocate.

Blessed are those who give without expecting anything in return. Love, [agape] gives with no strings attached. God so loves [agape], that God gives. Period.

Jesus is reminding us that the Kingdom of God functions according to different etiquette and different economic “rules”. The Kingdom of God is relational vs. transactional. We are welcome not based on any human pecking order or status, but just the opposite. God welcomes those whom polite society would push to the margins, and honors those most often ignored.

To eat and drink in the Kingdom of God, is to live in tension with the human hierarchies we have created that often define not only corporate boardrooms, but often our own interactions with people in our schools, workplaces and our community. (I resist adding, “in our churches” because I hope this is not the case!)

“God’s Kingdom is one not defined by scarcity, but abundance; not by who is ‘in’ or who is ‘out’, but where all are already welcome, loved, and cherished. The currency of God’s Kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity not stinginess, hospitality and welcome, not fear and suspicion”. *(Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus, post 8.21.2016)

Where Jesus is host, the guest list is a “grace list” – everyone is welcome. Last week we learned that widows, orphans, the poor, the incarcerated are among those whom

Jesus would offer hospitality. In this passage in Luke, we see that Jesus is interested in healing and making people whole, and in feeding both our bodies and our souls.

Due to Covid19 we are, of necessity, keeping our distance from one another to curb the spread of this deadly virus. We miss sitting down together, sharing a cup of coffee and conversation face to face. We long to share one another's company, "in the flesh". While we are thankful for this very technology that allows us to be "together" - there really is no substitute for being in one another's actual physical presence. This illustrates the whole concept of the incarnation: God sent Jesus in the flesh - to be with us - to demonstrate God's love in real and concrete ways.

Likewise, we do the same when we encounter others. We demonstrate the love and justice of God through the hospitality and welcome we exhibit each week when we gather for worship in our sanctuary, when we engage with people in our community, when we host Full Bellies each Thursday, when we fill the Blessing Box, when we support POM and the local food banks.

As much as I would love to throw a banquet for our church family and enjoy feasting and fellowship together - that will have to wait. However, we can still "throw a banquet" for those who need it more than we do. You and I will not be skipping a meal anytime soon, but there are those in our community who have lost jobs, had their hours cut back, are struggling to pay their rent. We can "invite them to the banquet" through our prayers and our support of the local food banks and ministries like POM that provide food, utility and rent assistance. From the abundance of God's blessing we can share so that no one goes hungry. When we do so, we demonstrate the honor and hospitality that Jesus calls us to. (And may God hasten the day when we can eat together. In the flesh.)

PRAY