

A Kingdom Dinner Party

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 14:1, 7-14



A confession: whenever I get an Evite, I often look to see who else is invited. This is a perk with an electronic invitation you don't get with the old-fashioned paper ones. When I get a paper one in the mail, I'm left to ponder who else might be coming. I may ask around, discreetly, but that only gets you so far. But with the Evite, all I have to do is scroll to the invited guests section and see. Is this going to be an event where I know people, or is it all strangers? Will there be lots of awkward silence, or good conversation? Is this gathering likely to get a little rowdy or will it stay decent and in order?

Sometimes that feature is turned off on the Evite, and when it is, I'm immediately suspicious. Who is it they have invited they don't want us to know about? Something's fishy with this party. Of course, I never stop to think it may be that they don't want anyone to know the pastor is coming.

For a while when we were first married, Kim worked for the Department of Human Services for the State of Tennessee. That served as my first occasion to be invited to an office Christmas party. I remember Kim saying she had to go. "No," I announced with the air of wisdom only a twenty-three-year-old seminary student can muster, "you don't *have* to do anything."

"It's important that I be seen there." And that was that. It was as fulfilling a party as you might imagine a gathering where everyone feels compelled to be there would be.

Jesus is invited to a nice party at the home of a Pharisee. Even though he has established himself as an absolutely horrible dinner guest by this time in Luke's Gospel, they have invited him anyway. Luke lets us know why early on. "They were watching him closely."

Jesus is also watching them. In Luke's Gospel, the table becomes a place where Jesus both teaches and embodies the kingdom that has drawn near. A table is really never just a table. It is the place where, if we have eyes to see, the heavenly banquet is set

before us, and we have the opportunity to eat the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation.

And just like at the tables around which we gather, there are manners that apply at the kingdom table.

I know some of you go to cotillion, and some of you did when you were younger. For those who do not know what that is, cotillion teaches social graces, table manners, and the like. I didn't go to cotillion, but I think I should have a certificate, since every meal with my grandmother was a lesson in manners.

Never pick up a utensil or take a bite until the hostess or host has done so. To this day, if someone at a table in a restaurant has not been served, they can say, "Please go ahead and start" till the place closes and I will not dare, because I can feel the stare of my grandmother from the heavenly table, saying those unforgettable words, "Remember your manners."

Always ask someone if they can *hand* you something, *please* and *thank you*. You *pass* a football; you *hand* your food.

Never reach over anyone to get anything, and if you absolutely must, apologize profusely and feel really bad about it for at least three hours.

One hand in your lap, *with* your napkin, and the other with the fork or spoon.

Yes, Ma'am no ma'am, yes sir no sir. I never quite knew what age a person had to be to get this honorific, so I said it to everyone.

Except one day I was eating at my grandmother's home around the circular table. It was summertime, and we were having lunch, just my grandmother, my brother, and me. Nellie was there too. Nellie was an African-American woman who came to my grandmother's house once a week to clean. On this day, she was doing the quarterly polishing of the silver. While we ate, she polished. She did not eat with us. I know now that it was probably because she wasn't invited. And she was the only adult ever in my grandmother's house I didn't have to address as Ma'am or Sir, though she was every bit as old as my grandmother. My brother and I, ten and seven respectively at the time, just called her Nellie.

I know now that there were manners and customs and ways at work there my grandmother accepted. There at the table, you were known by the way you behaved and

the company you kept. There were some lines that just were not to be crossed. If you were to ask my grandmother if she cared about Nellie, who worked in that house for well over thirty years, she would have said she did. But to invite her to sit down and have lunch with us?

They are watching Jesus, and Jesus is watching them. When it is time to sit at table, the predictable mad rush occurs. Everyone is concerned with where he or she is to sit. In first century Palestine, status was conveyed by the seating chart. No one sees the neighbor dining next to him; all he sees are people to overcome, rungs on the social ladder over which to climb. Get close to the host, you will be honored.

Jesus observes this behavior, and when the dust settles, shares what seems a bit of wisdom, but Luke calls a parable. It is a little advice; the kind a wise uncle might give you at a picnic. “If you hang back, the host will notice you and see that you are too far back for someone of your status and invite you to move up. Everyone will see you and you will be honored. But if you sit above your class, someone more important than you may show up and the host will make you move. Everyone will see you and you will be shamed.”

Lest anyone think this is just a new way to get what you want through a little subversion and everyone starts scrambling for the back seats instead of the front, Jesus turns to his host and suggests he reconsider his guest list. He dares to give a lesson in the table manners of the kingdom.

“When you give big parties like this, instead of inviting only those who can pay you back, only those who ‘need to be seen’ here, only those who share your status or your race or your income; try inviting those who can’t do anything for you. Try inviting the lame, the blind, the poor; these folks can’t possibly pay you back. Then you will truly be blessed.”

I wonder what the silence sounded like in that room?

The people may have wondered, “Who can do such a thing? You can only imagine such a world,” which is precisely the point. Parables shock our imaginations into an awareness of the nearness of the kingdom and the call to follow, no matter how out of step it is for the world.

Imagine a world filled with people so captured by grace and so filled with gratitude that they in turn give without counting the cost or calculating the payback.

Imagine a world where the people who get invited to the best parties are the people who need a good meal and warm hospitality.

Imagine a world where striving for status ceases and the mad rush to succeed at all costs comes to a halt, where true greatness is assigned to those who serve.

Imagine a world where your Lord and host serves you.

One scholar notes that Jesus is not calling here for Christians to provide for the needs of the poor and disabled; he says to invite them to dinner. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. The Greek word literally means, "Love of a stranger."

In the end, the parable invites us to think about who the real host is at this party we call church. Jesus addresses the host, but the parable imagines a world where Jesus is the host. If Jesus is the host, we are, all of us, guests. We are dependent, needy, blind and lame, all in need of grace, all in need of hospitality. We are guests, even in our own homes, especially in our own church.

Jesus delivers a painful and freeing grace to the Pharisees and to us. We did not create the world. We are guests.

There are table manners and then there are kingdom table manners.

On February 1, 1960, a young African American man, Ezell Blair, Jr. and three North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College students went to the classiest intersection of downtown Greensboro, walked into Woolworth's, bought some school supplies, sat down at the lunch counter, and ordered a doughnut and coffee.

"I'm sorry, we don't serve colored here," the waitress said. Blair pointed out that she was mistaken and held up his receipt from a nearby cash register. The young men stayed on their stools until the manager turned off the lights thirty minutes before closing time.

Earlier that day, Ezell Blair had said to his mother, "Mom, we are going to do something tomorrow that may change history, that may change the world."¹

¹ McWhorter, Diane, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. (New York: Touchstone, Simon and Schuster), page 149.

Yes, we still live in a world where people scan the Evite to see who's going to be there and who's not, where some are welcomed and some sit off to the side and polish the silver, where some can afford the table and some cannot. But, in the parable, we catch a glimpse of the kingdom that has drawn near in Jesus Christ, a table as generous as God's grace.

Friends, when you leave this place, everywhere you go, this table, the kingdom table, is set. Let us remember our manners. Amen.