

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 & Luke 14:1, 7-14
Seating Arrangements and Guest Lists

In Luke's Gospel Jesus is into meals, as in today's reading, where he's dinning at a Pharisee's house. This isn't the first time he's accepted a dinner invitation from a Pharisee. Luke tells of two other occasions, both of which turned into social disasters. At one a woman scandalised the guests by washing Jesus' feet, then anointing and kissing them. The other ended with Jesus giving a theological dressing down of the host and his friends. These episodes, not surprisingly, left some of the Pharisees feeling rather hostile towards Jesus, and it seems that Jesus had been invited to this meal so they could catch him out. That's the implication of the opening verse, 'they were watching him closely.'

While Jesus is being watched, he does some watching of his own. He sees the guests manoeuvring for places of honour at the table, and tells a story about seating arrangements at banquets, followed up with advice about guest lists.

The guests would recline on couches set along three sides of a rectangle. Normally a host would assign each guest to a seat, keeping in mind the person's social status and the need for helpful social interaction. The top places were usually near the centre, but on occasion, as in Luke's scene, the guests would be allowed to choose their own places. But this self-selection process could end up with guests jostling for the best spots, which is what's happening here – people doing what people naturally do – going for the best place.

Imagine yourself at this dinner. You've got yourself into a good position. Then the host offers toasts to the important guests, and you're mentally preparing your response as the host moves in your direction. But what does he do? He orders you off, 'Give the spot to this one.' How do you feel as you take the walk of shame down to the lowest spot? It's humiliating.

Jesus comments, 'When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher;" then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.' This is a good piece of advice to avoid social embarrassment, but Jesus is getting at something deeper.

His story touches on a popular subject that you can buy books about or even attend courses on. They have titles like, 'Looking Out for Number One!' or 'Getting a Front Row Seat!' They're popular because people want to get ahead and be noticed. It's about self-promotion. But what Jesus says on the subject isn't something you'll read in any of these books. Sitting at the back of the room doesn't get you anywhere, but then, Jesus isn't preparing us for getting on in the world. He's preparing us for taking our place in the kingdom of God.

Jesus says, 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' This is a reversal of what the books tell us. Instead, it opens up a world in which the values are radically different – where importance is measured by service, and wealth by humility. Status doesn't mean a thing in the eyes of God.

This story provides a blueprint for how we're to behave as a faith community. When Luke was writing his Gospel there was tension between Jewish Christians and those from a non-Jewish background. This passage was probably addressed to the Jewish Christians, who were struggling to accept the non-Jews who had joined them at the dinner party prepared by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were struggling to accept the idea that God was including these outsiders at

the table of divine love. Surely God favoured those who had followed God for centuries, not these newcomers? Sometimes we can, perhaps quite unconsciously, respond like that in the church. 'I've been around for decades, how dare that person who has been here two minutes, do that?'

Jesus follows this story up with some advice to the host about his guest list. It goes like this. When making up our guest list and deciding how to share the blessings we've received, don't go for those with whom we feel comfortable, or those who will give back in return, instead, Jesus says, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In other words, invite those forgotten by others – the last, the lost, and the least.'

Jesus is talking about hospitality. The word translated 'hospitality' means literally, 'love of a stranger.' So, hospitality isn't about inviting each other for dinner – it's not about spending time with people we're comfortable with – but welcoming into our midst those beyond our group, especially those left out by others. I wonder what that might say to us as a faith community – what it may say about our priorities. As English theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple remarked, 'The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.'

The challenge is to see those beyond own circle. The Letter to the Hebrews talks about this, 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... Remember those who are in prison.... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have....' Love is easy to exercise towards those we like and with whom we feel comfortable. It's a different matter when it's someone we don't like, or who is radically different from us. It's hard to work up a warm loving feeling towards them. But Christian love isn't something we feel. Love, at its best, is a verb, or as were taught, 'a doing word.'

Love is the sign of God's presence in this community, and it's what needs to fill the life of our faith community. It's what will draw people to God, and it's the way we prepare for the kingdom. It's a love that has as its special focus, those in need. It makes them, as Jesus puts it, honoured guests. By all means, give a donation to a charity, but Jesus tells us to get involved personally, to extend our friendship and to open our lives to them. Then, 'you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

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