"Invite the Poor, the Crippled, the Lame, and the Blind"

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Jesus receives an invitation to a dinner party, and he goes. It is the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, the Jewish holy day. The dinner party takes place at the home of a respected Jewish leader who had, evidently, issued invitations to quite a number of people. Whether he did this every week, or whether it was a special occasion, is not clear. What matters is the fact that, this time, he invited Jesus to this meal – and not for good reasons. "They were watching him closely." He was being watched.

To fully appreciate this story, and many others in the Gospels, you need to know a bit about the Pharisees. They were one of several different schools of thought in Judaism in the time of Jesus. There were the Zealots, a militant group that was training for an armed revolt against Rome. There were the Essenes, a monastic group that lived in the desert near the Dead Sea. There were the Sadducees, an aristocratic group who kept the temple running and who didn't want to offend Rome. And there were the Pharisees, Jewish "traditionalists" who carefully observed the Law of Moses as well as other Jewish customs that had been developed and passed down orally over several centuries. The Pharisees were, for the most part, the teachers of the common people, which gave them a tremendous amount of power and influence. Many of the rabbis were Pharisees. Of all the groups within Judaism, it was the Pharisees that Jesus was most often in conflict with, because the Pharisees were the group most concerned with the actual content of what Jesus was teaching. When the Pharisees started taking note of Jesus and his popularity, they started maintaining a careful watch over what he was saying and doing. They wanted to get a better sense of why he was so appealing to the common people. They wanted to know if what he was teaching was consistent with what *they* were teaching. And if it wasn't – well, then, they would have some decisions to make. So one of these Pharisees invites Jesus to a dinner party.

Jesus arrives at the dinner party, and he notices how the other guests are jockeying for position, each of them trying to get as close as they can to the host or to other guests who hold power and influence. This happens today, of course, at any event where someone important is present, and people try to get as close to that person as they can, seeking to further their own career goals, economic gain, or political influence. This is what was happening at the dinner party; everyone was primarily looking out for *their* best interests. Jesus seizes this opportunity to teach these Pharisees a lesson. On the surface it looks like a lesson about appropriate behavior, but at a deeper level it is really a lesson about how things work in the kingdom of God. He begins: "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet" – which is not what this is; this is just a dinner party on the Sabbath day, so Jesus does not *appear* to be criticizing their behavior – "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in

disgrace you would start to take the lowest place." That makes sense, right; at a wedding, everyone knows who is supposed to sit at the head table and who isn't; it would be *extremely* bad form for someone to sit at the head table who isn't supposed to be there, and extremely embarrassing for them when the bride or the groom comes to them and says, "Hey, buster, get out of this chair," with the whole crowd of wedding guests watching. Jesus isn't saying anything here that is controversial; everybody would be nodding their heads in agreement. He continues: "But 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 honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you." This part of his teaching does not make as much sense to most people, because what normal person would choose to sit at the *lowest* place? If the tables are arranged in tiers around the host table, with the closest tables being the wedding couple's closest friends and family, and the tables furthest away being the people who were *lucky* to receive an invitation, which close friend or family member would choose to sit at one of the tables farthest away? The bride or groom would come to them and say, "Hey, you're not supposed to be all the way back here; we've got a special seat for you up front." This person is of higher "rank," so to speak, and is invited to a seat of greater honor. Jesus is effectively telling these guests – all these people who have just been jockeying for position – that they need to stop being so selfish and let the *host* decide where they belong. Some of the more astute among those guests might realize that Jesus is, indirectly, being critical of their behavior, although it's subtle enough that some of them might miss it and think he's just talking about what they should or should not do at *weddings*. But then Jesus drives his point home, with what appears to be social commentary but is really a theological affirmation: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Now Jesus is talking about how *God* works, how God honors and exalts the humble, and brings down the haughty and arrogant. This message is at the core of his ministry; his mother Mary said as much, while Jesus was still in her womb: God "has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:51-53) It's a reminder to the guests at that banquet – and to all of us today – that God values *humility*. We don't need to be the richest, the most famous, the most popular. We don't need to boast of our own greatness; indeed, we shouldn't. Our goal shouldn't be approval and acclamation by other people; our goal should be approval and acclamation by *God*, as a result of the virtues we have cultivated and the good deeds we have done. We should aim to be doing what *God* wants, not what will make us popular.

Some of the more astute guests at that banquet may have realized – to their shame – that Jesus was calling them out for their behavior a few minutes earlier. Others may not have connected the dots. After all, Jesus hadn't criticized them *directly*. They might not have grasped this lesson about *humility*!

Jesus then turns his attention to the banquet host himself, the one who had issued all those invitations. These words are to-the-point. "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid." That is: don't invite people hoping to receive *favors* or *invitations* in return. Instead: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Jesus can see into this man's heart – the same way he can see into any of *our* hearts – and he senses that this man's motives and intentions are not pure. The host's motive for hosting this banquet? It wasn't to hang out with his friends. It wasn't to just have a nice time. No, it was more *self-serving*: "If I

invite so-and-so to this banquet, then maybe he will do me a favor in return." Jesus says: *that's not how God wants us to live*. Being faithful to God isn't about currying favor, making deals, getting something in exchange for something else. No. Being faithful to God is about being *generous*. This man has enough money to host all these people. Jesus is telling him: there's something *else* he should be doing with his resources. He could be using it to *make the world better*. He could be using it to *help level the playing field*. He could be using it to *do things for other people that they can't do for themselves*. He could be using it to *make a tangible difference in someone's life*. Who should this man invite? Not the people who don't need help. Not the people who are always trying to curry favors and jockey for position. No. "Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." The people who *really* need help.

When you read through the Gospels, you see Jesus reaching out to those people, again and again. In his inaugural sermon, Jesus said the Spirit of the Lord anointed him "to bring good news to the poor." (Luke 4:18) He told a rich young ruler to "sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor." (Matthew 19:21) In his parable of the sheep and the goats, he stressed the vital importance of giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty. (Matthew 25:31-46) He healed numerous people who were crippled; last week we heard about him healing a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. (Luke 13:10-17) He healed numerous people who were lame, like the man who had been lying on his mat by the side of a pool for 38 years (John 5:1-8), or the man who is lowered through a roof by his friends (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus also healed numerous blind people, including a beggar near Jericho (Luke 18:35-43) and a man who had been blind from birth (John 9). Jesus has spent much of his ministry reaching out to these specific groups of people – the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – and Jesus is basically telling the banquet host that he hasn't been ministering to those people *at all*. He's been too busy currying favors, and jockeying for position. He may be respected as a religious leader, but he's missing a *critical* part of what God is asking us to: to reach out to the less fortunate. To *help* people.

Most of you know that we make and deliver 84 sack lunches to Advent House in Lansing every week, to help feed the hungry and the homeless. Most of you know that we deliver several hundred pounds of food to the Mason Food Bank multiple times a year. Most of you know that we take up a collection for hunger relief efforts on the last Sunday of the month every single month. Many of you might *not* be aware of something the youth of our church have been doing for the past couple years: preparing and serving breakfast or lunch on Saturday mornings to hungry people in downtown Lansing. They have done this about six times now. They shop for the groceries and prepare the food on Friday evenings here at the church, then on Saturdays they go to places like the CATA bus station, set up a table, and start giving away a hot meal. They feed about 60-80 people each time, and then afterwards they debrief the experience together. This is hands-on, face-to-face, eye-to-eye ministry with people who are hungry. This is the kind of thing that was missing from that banquet host's life. This is what he needed to be doing. Not just inviting the so-called "important" people to his home for a meal on the Sabbath day – but bringing tangible help and aid to the people in his community who really needed it.

I learned from the Mason Police Chief earlier this year that we have about half a dozen homeless people here in Mason. They're pretty invisible; most of us probably never see them. But sooner or later we might. Sooner or later, we might face some kind of choice: tell them to leave and kick them off our streets, or invite them to a banquet. What would be the *right* choice? What would *Jesus* want us to do?

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