

'Unspoken Party Rules' Rev. Jane Courtright Sept. 1, 2019

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Mmmmm....SO, HO HUM.....

That's **ONE** reaction to our gospel reading today!

or maybe a polite yawn....

one you try not to be *too obvious* about!

I mean, really,

Don't ya think that Jesus comes off as a 'sort of' progressive

Miss Manners in this scene?

Actually, this story is pretty typical of Luke's gospel!

Did you know that Luke's gospel

has more meal-time scenes than all the other gospels?

In fact, Luke views life as a journey, and also as a party.

The Jesus of Luke loves to eat and drink!

And it doesn't matter where or with whom the eating happens:

On the road to Emmaus, in an Upper Room,

in the fields along the road (plucking heads of grain,)

at the calling of the disciple Matthew,

in the home of the disciple Matthew,

in the home of Levi, the despised tax collector,
or when respected religious leaders
invite Jesus to join **them** for a meal:
Like Simon the Pharisee in Chapter 7,
or in today's passage,
when an unnamed leader of the Pharisees
offers the honor of hospitality to Jesus.

And **like last week's story**,

in which Jesus frees the bent-over woman,
There's **a lot more** going on in today's story than *meets the eye!*

For example: Notice how Jesus responds
to the honor of being included in this social event.
I guess we *shouldn't be surprised* that Jesus does and says things
that cause either dead silence or an uproar of protest!
After all, **WE'VE** been tipped off by earlier stories.

Also, remember we **ARE** told in the first verse today....

that "**THEY** were watching Jesus *closely*."

The Greek word for 'watching' implies **hostile** observation.

This **WAS** a high society party among the leading citizens, who were Pharisees, probably from Jerusalem.

They were among the 'rich cats' of the time.

ALL the important people were there!

Let's imagine on....

This particular Pharisee has a BEAUTIFUL home high in the hills overlooking Jerusalem ...candle light at night.

Ladies come to the party with gold necklaces

and strings of pearls draped around their evening gowns.

The men look stately in purple linens, with gold rings on their fingers.

There's sophisticated small talk going on, with hor'derves & polite smiles.

EVERYONE is witty & clever. People are having a **GOOD** time!

Who is the guest of honor at this party? **JESUS**.

Everybody who's anybody wants a seat near **HIM**.

They want to be at the **HEAD** table with Jesus, up front....

Where all the **IMPORTANT** people are sitting!

The host ushers everyone in to be seated.

The last guest to be ushered in is Jesus, the honored guest!

Everyone is envious of those at the head table,
but not **OBVIOUSLY** so.

They all want to be at the head table,
but they *pretend* they don't care.

Then Jesus speaks:

Jesus says to everybody, but to nobody in particular:

“Why are all of you people trying so hard to be **IMPORTANT?**

Why **DO YOU** want to be seated at the head table?”

(Everyone's *a bit embarrassed* by Jesus' opening remark!

Jesus goes on to say,

“A person who exalts themselves in this life
will be humbled.

When a person exalts themselves in this life,
they **WILL BE** exalted.”

Now, people laugh nervously....a nervous coughing sound.

People are starting to feel *distinctly uncomfortable*.

THEN, Jesus looks down at the head of the table & says to the host
(*who is probably wishing he could fall through the floor,*)

“Why did you invite **all these people** to your party?

Why didn't you invite *some of my friends*:

Like the prostitutes, **the homeless**, the beggars from downtown,
the widows, the really poor people? **The garbage collectors?**

Why didn't you invite **THOSE** people to your party.....

And seat them at your **HEAD TABLE?**”

By this time, the host has to be *really upset!*

Maybe he purses his lips, furls his brow,
tightens the muscles around his eyes or jaw.

Says nothing, but thinks....

“This is the **LAST** time I'll every invite **this JESUS** to dinner.

No manners....no etiquette. **NO.**

He will **NEVER** be invited to one of MY parties again!”

I invite you to remember some other *famous or not so famous* dinner parties!

What **WOULD** Jesus have thought of **them**?

What would his comments have been?

If Jesus had written the guest list for **THESE** parties,

Would those who attended *be different*? How would people be *seated*?

Imagine with me the year 1860, right before the Civil War.

Let's enter into the movie, "Gone With the Wind."

We are visiting a southern plantation named TARA.

Tara is lovely, with its long rows of lush trees on with side of the road leading up to the mansion.

The mansion itself is lovely with columns, gardens, & cotton fields stretching into the distance.

It's Saturday night and a big party is being held.

Who is present at this party at Tara?

The plantation owner and all his rich friends, with slaves to serve them.

If Jesus were the host,

ALL the people living and working plantations would be present:

The black slaves. **The cotton pickers.** The share croppers. **The poor people.**

Now, imagine with me the year 1912.

The Victorian age is coming to an end.....

as storm clouds of war gather on the horizon.

People are about to board that **DOOMED** ship, **THE TITANIC**.

They are amazed at this ship, the work of human hands...

A triumph of technology and engineering.

“Even God couldn’t sink this ship!” many were heard to say.

The people board the Titanic class by class.

You hear the sharp divisions between the people,
determined by their resources.

The ship had many levels,

and NO ONE was allowed to cross the lines
that separated one class from another.

IT WAS SIMPLY **NOT DONE!**

At the top were the millionaires, then the rich people,

Then the *second class or middle class people*,

Then *the third class people*: the working class or poor

...in the **steerage**, the bottom part of the Titanic.

We all know what happened to all these people....

& with that miracle of technology that could reportedly outsmart God.

YOU know how much the **GOD OF CLASS** really mattered
when the ship went down.

Rich & poor alike, hundreds of them, shared the same tragic fate.

In the musical version of the Titanic,

the designer of the ship sings these lyrics:

They'll lose all sense of right and wrong, it

will be everyman for himself,

alright, the weak thrown in with the strong.

First class & third & second will mean NOTHING!

and sheer humanity will prevail – one single class.”

What would Jesus have thought of the levels, berth & dinner arrangements?

One of my favorite films is called **‘Places in the Heart.’**

Sally Fields won her 2nd Academy Award for her role in this movie.

Yet again, imagine with me....living on a small farm in Texas in the 1930's.

Imagine a poor widow with small children.

She takes in boarders to help ends meet on her dirt-poor farm.

Her two boarders are a blind man & an African American man.

The African American man is also the farm hand and manager.

He faces some '**right in your face**' racism from white neighbors.

The scene I remember best from this movie

is the amazing final scene, set in church

during the Sacrament of Communion.

As Communion is served in the pews,

the camera pans the congregation.

And there, pictured all around this woman in church,

are all the people who **are & have been** significant in her life:

Those living and dead, **both rich and poor**, the lame and blind,

The believer in racial justice and the **Klu Klux Klan**.

It's a portrait of the heavenly banquet, *the communion of saints*,

if ever there was one...one which will include **EVERYONE!**

With a guest list Jesus would approve!!!

Finally, imagine *with me* a present day scene:

It's around 9 p.m. at an **emergency food and housing shelter**.

On a typical night, nearly 30 people arrive by van

and a church group swings into action,

serving lasagna & garlic bread they made in a church kitchen.

You notice a woman in a *light jacket*, which is **ODD**...

since it's nearly 90 degrees in the shade.

She slips several pieces of garlic bread into her pockets to eat later.

After a couple more pay checks, she hopes to rent her own place.

You notice a man who is **scanning the crowd** for danger...

which is not surprising, since he's been in prison

doing a 6 – 10 yr. sentence for Robbery 3 & assault.

He's feeling claustrophobic & unsafe without his own cell.

Everyone else is watching this man, too,

to see if he's a threat!

With a felony record, you can imagine how his **job search** is going!

Typical nights here *run smoothly*...& the next 30 people line up to eat.

Fights are rare....**Knock on wood**....*but they do happen*.

Usually, it's a lot of name calling and threats.

Then the staff have to ask some people to leave and cool off!

Sometimes people show up drunk....but not too often...

People know the rules:

No smoking, no drinking, **no drugs**, no weapons, **no bags**.

The volunteer workers and the homeless people mix & talk & eat.

This is a place where homeless people mix with middle and upper classes.

It is **CLOSE** to the banquet Jesus imagines in Luke's gospel.

THE SCENE GIVES US HOPE!

If we're honest, the scene also **scares the bejeebers** out of us!

Jesus is not acting like Miss Manners in **THIS** scene!

He's not just giving etiquette advice!

Once again, Jesus is turning things **UPSIDE DOWN...**

turning convention on its head.

He is challenging the status quo.....

not only of his time, but of ours as well.

Isn't life confusing enough already?

There are few things we crave more in life than **ORDER**.

We'd like to know **how we stand**,

How we're **doing**, how we **measure up**.

And so, we compare ourselves to others.

That's why pecking orders are so important.

Love them, or hate them, **OR BOTH,**

...we're aware of them, AND invested in them.

Then, Jesus comes along & says there **IS no** pecking order.

THIS OUGHT TO BE GOOD NEWS,

But it throws us into a *radical dependence* on grace....

God's kind of grace.

We **can't** stand on our **accomplishments**, our wealth, **our talents**,

Our good looks, our IQ, or even **our own strength**.

In fact, we have **NO CLAIM** on God.

WE have been invited to God's banquet

to love others with God's kind of love!

We are called to change our very social patterns....

to invite the homeless, the street people,

people with mansion-like houses,

HUD people, **wealthy people**, mentally challenged people,

the young and the elderly, **those who are lonely or sad,**

the man or woman with AIDS, the blind to many things,

those who can't walk, **those with no job,**
the so-called straight people, the gay & lesbian people & others,
believers and non-believers,
people from the 'right AND the left
& everywhere in between.
(If there is such as place these days!)

Why, we are to invite the **very people** we would really rather ignore.
The ones we think of and say, "Well, not THEM, of course!"

The very people who make us feel embarrassed,
UNCOMFORTABLE.

So, I challenge you to invite the people above and more.

Jesus doesn't ask us to wait and welcome people

Just when they **HAPPEN** to show up.

WE ARE TO ACTIVELY INVITE THEM!

Let's make this First Congregational United Church of Christ

in Eagle River, and our homes, our lives,

ooooze God's hospitality and love.

LET'S GO OUT OF HERE AND INVITE PEOPLE!

Maybe even *pick them up* and bring them!

Could it be that people will be moved, lives will change,
as we help create a *glimpse, a pocket,*
a scene of the Banquet of God?

As a body of Christ Jesus,
let's turn things **upside down**, by saying: (or singing)

COME TO THE BANQUET, THERE'S A PLACE FOR YOU!!!

Amen.