**Luke 14:1,7-14** August 28, 2022

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 *Luke 14:1 One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched…*

 *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…*

 *12Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid…”*

*The full text will be read in the course of the sermon.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Humility- The Christian Way of Life
I. We humbly appraise ourselves before God
II. We offer humble service to those in need**

 Today’s Gospel reading reminds me a little bit of a movie from the 1950’s, *Giant*. It was James Dean’s last movie. In the movie, which spans decades, his character slyly maneuvered himself from ranch hand to the wealthiest and most powerful man in Texas. At the end he hosted a dinner with all the rich and bold and beautiful of the state. There he would be more-or-less crowned King of Texas. Hundreds were in attendance. He had made a special point of inviting the family he had to step on to rise so high. At that magnificent banquet he so embarrassed himself that his hundreds of guests—even a US senator and the woman he had courted as a trophy wife—they all walked out and left him crying in his champagne. I don’t think even the staff stuck around to do the dishes. It was poetic justice.

 It went even worse, if on a smaller scale, for the Pharisee who hosted the dinner of our reading. I say worse because the stakes are so much higher when Jesus is involved.

 This Pharisee, and no run-of-the-mill Pharisee at that, but ***“a prominent Pharisee,”*** had arranged a meal, a guest list, and a scheme. The host and his fellow skeptics planned on ambushing Jesus at the dinner. They would be ***“carefully watching”*** Jesus. Their intent was to find fault with him, to discredit him as teacher and rabbi. Lest you think I am reading things into the story and attaching uncharitable motives to them, consider the first piece of evidence: Each time that this Greek word for ***“carefully watching”*** is used in the Gospels, it is used in this context of people trying to trip Jesus up. Every time. Second piece of evidence: If you attentively listen to these middle chapters of Luke, during Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem, time and again you will sense Pharisees lurking in the shadows, knives drawn, waiting for the signal to pounce—well, not literally, at least not yet. But they had their reasons. Jesus had frequently highly critical of them, their spiritual hypocrisy and their self-righteous attitudes.

 But back to the meal. Almost as soon as Jesus had arrived, the wheels started coming off. Jesus healed a sick man in front of them all (that part was in verses 2-6 that our reading skipped), and then he gave them a lecture about their lack of mercy.

 Then, in events of our reading, Jesus proceeding to “insult” the guests. He cut them all to the quick over their shameless social climbing. Sparing no one, Jesus finally pointed his finger at the host and his self-serving motives.

 No, that Pharisee didn’t sleep well that night! It had been the most socially embarrassing day of his life. Not only had he and his associates failed to find fault with Jesus, but Jesus had shamed them all—we might even say he convicted them of sin. Doubtless, it was a meal everyone remembered and few talked about for the rest of their lives. That’s what we do with shame—remember it but don’t talk about it.

 Which is ironic. It is ironic that Jesus’ message about how humility exalts and lifts up, only worked humiliation for those who would not take his message to heart.

**I.** What Jesus says in this reading is kind of strange. Maybe you felt it as you listened to this reading. Many have remarked that these words don’t sound like the sort of thing Jesus usually said. Usually, when you hear Jesus speak, you immediately realize that you are listening to deep spiritual truths. And you know that the you meditate on his words, more and deeper truths will be revealed to you.

 But these words in Luke 14—and I say this as reverently as possible—but these words sort of come off like advice from a social column. It’s like someone had a question for Ann Landers (you have to be over 40 to know who she is), and she gave the sort of advice that Ann Landers gives, not Jesus. It’s like Jesus’ biggest concern at this moment is that you don’t get embarrassed at a luncheon. That’s not bad, but we expect meatier stuff from the mouth of our Savior. Let us dig deeply for what Jesus here teaches us.

 So, Jesus was at this meal ***“when he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table.”*** It was ugly. Jesus confronted the ugliness with a parable about a wedding reception. He used a wedding reception for a reason. There are few situations where places of honor are more obvious than at wedding receptions. The bride and groom and their attendants sit up there in the front, obviously the center of attention. Close by sit the parents, then aunts and uncles; maybe a few cousins, and so it goes to the back of the room. You can feel the hierarchy.

 This is so obvious that even a child understands it. I did. Through my grade school years my dad was a pastor at a big church in a small town. He officiated at lots of weddings, and once in a while even the pastor’s family got invited to the reception. Very generous. Back then, being a big church pastor in a small farming town carried about as much prestige as there was to be had in a place like that. And so, when we did get invited to the reception over at Club Chapparal, we usually got seated sort of high up, maybe the row of tables behind the immediate family. No one would put the pastor back in the corner! Except at one reception we were. Grade-schooler that I was, I was kind of upset about that—see how that pride thing happens—because I felt that my dad had been disrespected. (Actually I was probably more concerned about how long it would take for the food to get to us, but I do remember feeling wronged!) I don’t know exactly what I said, but somehow it came up and my parents were totally okay with it. But I wasn’t. You see, when Jesus ***“noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table,”*** he wasn’t just looking at Pharisees, he was looking at humanity.

 We are keenly aware of our place in the social fabric. All our protests to the side, all our knowledge that we really shouldn’t be like that, we protest when we don’t get what we feel is our due. We may not want the attention of the highest seat in the place, but we expect to *not* be stuck at the kitchen door with waitresses and waiters bumping our elbows as they scurry by.

 So Jesus ***told them this parable: “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. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But 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 your fellow guests.”***

 Now the way Jesus tells it, this is not what we usually think of as a parable. It sounds like mere advice, but the fact that the Scripture inserts the word ***“parable”*** tells us that this is more than social advice.

 That deeper thing, that heavenly meaning behind this earthly story, is in the relationship of the host and the guest. Who is the host, and who the guest? Of course, we individually, are the guest. I am the guest, and you are the guest, and you and you. And the host is God himself. The fundamental attitude defining the relationship between the guest and the host of this parable, between us and God, is deference and humility.

 How can it be any other way for Christians? We understand who we are and what we are. We are saved! And we realize we needed to be saved! It is God’s grace, not our achievement. It is through faith, not our works. Therefore it doesn’t bother God’s children to be humble! We Christians are humble because we have a realistic view of who we are. Our humility before God leads us to listen to him, to obey, to praise, to give him credit.

 This humility does not worry us. Many people are afraid of humility because they worry that if they are humble, they will miss out, be passed over. But we are confident even as we are humble because we actually believe it when God says that he so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

 Of course, the unbelievers of the world can’t be humble like that, because they don’t understand what God has given in Christ Jesus.

 But to those in on the truth, Jesus pronounces this benediction: ***“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*** Thank you, Jesus!

**II.** After critiquing the guests, Jesus turned on his host and said, ***“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”***

 Now Jesus was not telling you, “When you cook a meal, it is a sin to invite friends over.” Jesus himself went to such meals. He showed up at this Pharisee’s house. He frequently ate at Mary and Martha’s house.

 As with everything, the crucial issue is motive. The problem is when all of your hospitality or generosity is calculated with a net gain in mind; “What do I get out of this?” For example, another pastor had a man give a pretty ordinary used queen size bed to a needy couple through his church. That man wanted the pastor to sign for the bed as a charitable tax write off gift of a couple thousand dollars. He wasn’t giving out of charity, but for the tax break! For example, Henry Ford, it is said, was the champion of the eight hour work day—not out because he cared about the well-being or the family time of his workers but because studies showed that workers produced more and better cars when they only worked eight hours a day instead of twelve. What a guy!

 You get the idea, right? ***“When you give a luncheon, do not invite your friends… [because] they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.”***

 Jesus would have us examining ourselves for the motive of the things we do, especially the nice things we do. When we help others so that they will help us in our turn, there is nothing wrong with that, but it is nothing more than self-preservation. There is no more godliness in that than paying your home insurance premium.

 As we ask what our motives are for what we do, we start to see that the vast majority of things that we do, even the nice and kind things we do, have some benefit that comes back to us. And here we think not only of material benefit, but also thanks or recognition and even the, “It makes me feel so good when I help others.” (Does that mean if it didn’t make you feel good you wouldn’t help?) I’m not trying to be a wet blanket here, but really, what are our motives in doing things?

 At this point we start to ask ourselves how often it is that we actually do things that we really get nothing out of. Maybe it is time to start actually troubling ourselves, I mean *really* troubling ourselves, for the good of other people. Is that not what Jesus had in mind in verse 13? ***“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind… although they cannot repay you.”***

 Can I volunteer for a community service group? Can I charitably give some of my hard earned money, maybe even for people I don’t entirely approve of? Can I be a foster parent? Can I speak the Gospel of Jesus even when I know it may not be welcomed? Do I do any of that? Ever?

 Dear God in heaven, forgive us. That’s all we can say. Forgive us daily. We are so not humble nor so generous. Forgive us for Jesus’ sake.

 And in the joy of that forgiveness, help us to be humble in our sense of self-worth, even while confident that we are priceless to God. Help us to be other-centered in our motivations, while being certain that God knows, notes and will repay at the resurrection of the righteous. Amen.