

Proverbs 25:6-7
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Whom do you invite to dinner?

I wish we could invite more people to dinner these days. When we organized and energetic enough, we invite friends whom we don't see often, coworkers who we want to get to know, or people whom we enjoy. Occasionally we'll invite folks over in response to an invitation that we received. It's often about nurturing and cherishing relationships.

In the first century, meals and guest lists were closely prescribed. One's status in relationship with the host and one's status in society were both reflected in invitations received and subsequent seating at the table. It was a society based primarily on questions of honor and shame. I know there are parts of society where this is still the underlying concern. That may matter to you – I don't know. It feels very far from my life. Yet the fact is that our family hospitality is usually extended to people we know, and with whom we share an informal sort of reciprocity agreement in friendship. There is a parallel, though it may be painful to see it.

Jesus spoke to the Pharisee who hosted his dinner, and throws the social schema on its head. Meals and hospitality shouldn't be about honoring those who are already honored in our world. They shouldn't be tending relationships of reciprocity. Jesus told this Pharisee host that his social status isn't worth squat – I'm sure that went over well. It would certainly make you think about whether to invite this Jesus over again. Instead, Jesus said to invite people who could never dream of repaying the favor. Invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." (*Lk 14:13*)

Invite the people without status, and perhaps whom you barely know - people whom you would otherwise never include on the list. And then give them the seat of honor.

Imagine you or someone else applying this advice to your next birthday party or big anniversary celebration. We'd dispense with any attempts to be proper – "I really should invite so-and-so." The celebration would not be with those who know us well as friends or colleagues, but with total strangers – people who need the good news and generosity of a party more than anyone else.

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Jesus pushes us to a limit and presses beyond. It ends up that Jesus isn't just giving advice, like Emily Post. Our gospel passage says that Jesus is telling parables and that's not a typo.

Both of Jesus' hospitality parables which we hear today, were about living in the kingdom of God – as we live now, and as we'll do for eternity. In the first part, he spoke our humility, as we sit at a grand banquet given by the ultimate host. In the face of grandeur, and surrounded by many others, we should not assume that we are the most honored of the group. We can not assume that we have it right (whatever "it" is) or that God's on our side. Often God's on a side that we can't see because of the human blinders we wear. To be gracious guests in God's world, and at God's glorious celebration, is to be humble and forgiving to the guests around us. It's to let God be the one who makes decisions of judgment and honor.

The second parable speaks of how we serve as hosts, reflecting the generosity and the priorities of God. To live fully in the kingdom of God is to radically share God's generosity with those in need, and those on the edges of society. It means to welcome and to honor the least, the lost, the last, and the lonely as God's cherished

people. It means to reach out to them and offer ourselves in service and in hospitality.

Just as for the Pharisee, Jesus turns our world upside-down. He paints for us a new picture of life with God. He shows us how to be creatures, entrusted with the important role of sharing God's love in the world.

Key figures in our nation debate about where Islamic mosques may be built in a nation built on religious freedom. States and courts clash about how our government should relate to people who move to the U.S. illegally – “aliens”, I believe we name them, like the fictional little green men on Mars. Five years after Hurricane Katrina, we consider how the lives of the poor in one city were devastated, even under the care of emergency personnel and funding. Every one of these issues boils down to how we treat the needy among us. We allow only some people cherished status. We choose who can live or worship or be cared for in our society.

Jesus would have disciples and the church be different. We are to be Christ's presence in the world today. When others are forgotten or lonely? We are to remember and invite them. When people are abused or neglected? We are to shower them with care and join them in a prayerful search for justice. Unlike our world, the kingdom is not about who deserves what based on details of their identity – like income, race, religion, fashion sense or sexual orientation. Kingdom living serves those in need based on their identity – as children of God, our creator.

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What does this mean for us?

This kingdom vision sounds like a law that would be hard to live up to – and it is vision difficult. Yet Jesus describes a way of being together that is freeing. Jesus

invites us to live aware of our faults and weaknesses, and of God's love for us. Jesus calls us to be humans who care for one another, to recognize others as sisters and brothers. Jesus feeds us and helps us with his own presence in our lives, so that we can do these things. Through the good news, Jesus frees us from a sense of obligation to artificiality of our societal face-saving and game-playing habits. We are freed to receive one another as who people are. We are freed to give ourselves away as the Spirit enables us, as Christ's body that feeds and loves the world. Amen.