

“FOOD FOR THOUGHT: ANOTHER DINNER PARTY”

Luke 14:1-24

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In our summer sermon series, we’re reflecting on Bible stories that revolve around food and meals. This is a particularly big thing in Luke’s gospel, where we find this story in which Jesus attends a dinner party ...where he tells a story about a dinner party.

There’s a lot to think about here, but don’t you have to wonder how Jesus ever managed to get invited anywhere? He doesn’t exactly behave like the ideal guest – polite, appreciative praising the food, admiring the décor, making light-hearted conversation and avoiding controversial subjects like religion and politics. No. On the way to dinner, he makes everyone wait while he stops off to do a good deed that absolutely could have waited for a day or two, and takes the opportunity to question his companions’ understanding of scripture. Then he criticizes the manners of his fellow guests, before he turns to his host and tells him he should have invited some different folks. And when one of the other guests makes a remark about the kingdom of God, Jesus tells this story that seems to say, “you might be surprised about who’s included in the kingdom of God.” I can just imagine the host thinking, “this is the last time we invite him.”

Of course, it seems that Jesus was invited to this dinner not out of friendship but out of curiosity or suspicion, or simply because the leader of the local synagogue expected to invite guests to his home. The tension of the situation reflects the tension Luke’s gospel repeatedly highlights – between the world as it is and the values of the kingdom.

Commentators tell us that the social background of this story has to do with cultural norms about reputation and respect. A more powerful individual would typically gain honor and solidify their position by gifting the less influential with favors – like dinner invitations, and the best seats at dinners. Those who were a bit lower on the social ladder would attempt to enhance their reputations by getting close to those who commanded more respect... and by repaying favors in whatever way they could. Everybody benefitted – at least, everybody who was included. Today we might call this “networking.”

But Jesus – especially in Luke’s gospel – questions the values and assumptions behind this ethic of reciprocity. For one thing, to be “honored” and respected in the eyes of other people is a temporary and precarious thing. You can’t count on it. There’ll always be somebody else to come along and claim the position or attention you think you deserve. And it’s based on a false notion of what it means to be a worthy person. Real worth doesn’t come from seeking privilege and grabbing every chance to get ahead, but from God who is the source of human dignity. So instead of pursuing “honor” Jesus advises humility.

Now, context matters here. Jesus is not suggesting more meekness and passive acceptance to the already-downtrodden. His audience is the relatively powerful and privileged, so he's confronting them with the problematic nature of the way they are living their lives. He wants them to see how shaky and impermanent a foundation they've rested their lives on. He's asking them to see how their pursuit of their own status leads to competition instead of cooperation and community. Throughout the whole encounter, we see him pointing to the people who are left out of this social system built on doing things for people who you believe can do things in return for you, placing them at the center of his concern. Jesus says to his host, "for your next dinner party, how about inviting your neighbors who are poor or disabled, people who don't have "connections" or influence?" In other words, how about real hospitality, which can only happen where there's humility?

Christians often look to Jesus' words here, about inviting the poor and the lame and the blind, and think of soup kitchens, food pantries, and homeless shelters. But, as needed as those ministries unfortunately are, I don't think that's what Jesus means here. This is about hospitality, not handouts. Not charity, but community and communion. A welcome, a place at the table, a different vision of what the table is *for*.

But then, Jesus takes this vision, and kind of turns it, to show it from a different perspective, as he tells a story about someone who plans a big feast, and invites a lot of people. Only, instead of RSVP-ing with thanks, some of them make excuses. Now, they aren't about insignificant things, these excuses. But they represent what, in that culture, defined a good and stable life: Security, prestige, and family. Land could provide security. Few farmers owned any oxen, so the purchase of five pairs would be a real status symbol. Marriage marked the establishment of a household, and, if you were fortunate, new family connections that might help you in life. Each of these invitees is essentially declaring that they've arrived at a place where they haven't any need of or interest in the hospitality on offer – the foolishness and arrogance of this was undoubtedly obvious to everyone listening.

Here Jesus has brought us back to that troublesome issue of hospitality and status. But now, instead of being asked "why don't you expand your idea of hospitality?" his host and fellow guests are being asked, "are you willing to *accept* hospitality?"

The parable is openly about the kingdom of God. No doubt the folks Jesus is having dinner with believe themselves to be invited, even honored guests at the God's table. But Jesus' parable questions – not their invitation – but their willingness to understand it and accept it.

The parable asks "Why don't you want to accept the hospitality of the reign of God?" Do you believe you don't need it? Are you too attached to these things you think will bring you respect and security? Have you bought into the myth that these are the things that make you deserving of God's favor as well? Do you object to sharing it with people you consider undeserving? Can you just not bring yourself to accept the generosity of the invitation?

I guess Jesus wants to make really sure they understand how expansive the invitation is, because in his story, the party giver sends out his servant not once but twice, to make sure that everybody, especially those who might consider themselves the least welcome, isn't just invited but *brought in*. The party, apparently, will be bigger than anybody ever imagined. Picture it however you want: a fiesta, a pride picnic, a big Thanksgiving table, a smorgasboard of gourmet treats. But it's not an exclusive party, and it doesn't seem like there are assigned seats or tables for dignitaries. At this feast, the etiquette is humility, which just means honoring the shared humanity of all. If you want to taste the feast, you have to get on board with that.

It occurs to me that what Jesus says about rewards for welcoming those who can't do you favors and what he says about some people not tasting the feast might be two sides of the same promise. Maybe humility and an inclusive welcome brings its own reward in the love and abundant gifts of the beloved community. Maybe unwillingness to be part of it the means that the delicious joy and goodness of God's grace tastes like sawdust and leaves you cold.

Jesus' story about a great feast isn't about a dinner party. It's about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God. But then again, the reign of God *is* about dinner, isn't it? About who's welcome at our tables, and who's in our thoughts as we eat. About who gets to eat. And about church, and community, and hospitality to strangers, and accessibility, and a seat at the table. About the incredible feast of good things God spreads in the world and offers to us... and our willingness to both receive it and share it.

Resources:

Articles on Luke 14:1-6, Luke 14:7-14, and Luke 14:15-24 in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke*, volume 2, Cynthia Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds.