

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; **for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”** Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. **Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have,** for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. *NRSV Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16*

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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. 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. **For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. **But 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.**” *NRSV Luke 14:1,7-14*

“Factions at the Feast: Who’s Invited?”

Years ago, there was a secret saying in my home church - something that was only whispered in private corners - never spoken out loud into a room, and here it is.... ***“If they find out you’re a sinner, they’ll tell you that God loves you, but they’ll never invite you to dinner.”*** Even as a young child, I knew there were more ways than **being a sinner** to be excluded from dinner in those tight Christian circles. I saw that the families in my church who were in business had a sort of social clique of their own, and they didn’t usually invite the farmers or the construction workers or the grocers for a meal. So today once again, we get to listen in on what **Jesus** has to say about all our dinner parties.

There are **two** lessons in today’s gospel; both about social hierarchy and how Jesus feels about it. First, Jesus points to the practice of dinner guests vying for the best places - the seats of honour. Have you ever been to a social gathering with prestigious people, like politicians or maybe even a room full of bishops? Have you noticed the lineup of people hovering close to the important guests, waiting for a turn to move in - hoping for a little attention? And then there’s that embarrassing moment when you feel the sting of their chagrin as

they're passed over for someone more important. Jesus suggests that we might save ourselves that shame by exercising a little humility. The other lesson is about who should be invited to dinner in the first place. Jesus warns the host that inviting your friends and relatives is all very well, but clearly, it'll work out well for you, since they'll be obliged to **reciprocate**. But then it gets **really** hard. When we plan this wonderful celebration of good food, bringing out the best dishes and cutlery and the fine linens, apparently we should do it for the people who will **really** benefit from it - for the people who cannot invite us back - the people we normally **overlook** - people who are dependent on the care and generosity of others just to survive. Our human feasts can be exclusive, but the table in **God's** Kingdom invites **everyone** in. Today's lectionary skips over another story of Jesus healing someone - this time a man with "dropsy" or what we would call edema. Once again the religious elite questions his healing the man on the Sabbath, and once again Jesus shuts them down, reminding them that this healing represented the very **essence** of God's kingdom - that caring for this man was much more important than using the letter of the law to shut someone out. So last week, Jesus healed the bent-over woman and said that was more important than our churchy customs and rules, and this week, he heals again, and shows us who **should** be invited to the banquet.

This concept of hospitality - of inviting people to gather around a table - is a really useful tool we can use to take stock of whether we're more **churchy** like the Pharisees, or more **gospel-oriented**, like Jesus. Meals are an important part of how we share ourselves with one another. There are some wonderful movies that demonstrate the depth of the meaning of sharing food. In *The Matrix*, when Neo goes to the Oracle for wisdom and guidance, he finds her baking in the kitchen, and she gives him cookies. She feeds the people that come to her in more ways than one. In *Babette's Feast*, Babette prepares a feast for her employers and their friends, and she does it with such love and care that the beautiful food has a tremendous effect on the guests - their hearts burst open to floods of beautiful memories, and to more gentleness, love and grace in their relationships. What happens around our tables is very important. How **open** and **inviting** our tables are is **crucially** important. Jesus' comments about invitations to dinner are pointed directly at the hosts. There's something at stake, here, with inviting those who cannot invite us back. We will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. So the reward in opening up our table feast is an eternal one - a spiritual reward. Jesus turns this simple conversation about table manners and invitations - pretty ordinary human stuff - into a theological treatise which creates a juxtaposition between the eternal and the existential. This glimpse of the spiritual meaning of something as simple as dinner, connects our eschatological hope - our desire to belong to God's Kingdom, to the choices we make right here and right now. So what does this mean for us, especially in the light of the changes we're living through, and the decisions we face about our worship space, our plans and our future? Dr. David Jacobsen suggests that table manners matter - because they **reveal** to us, right here in the middle of our messy human interactions, how we really feel about God's purposes and intentions in our community. Our table manners here in this place - how we get along together around the table - and more importantly, who we invite to **join** us - tell us maybe more than we want to know about how close we're getting to what God asks of us.

If we have an understanding of church as a peaceful place of escape from the world, we've got it wrong. This is supposed to be the place where we face the hard issues of the world and find a way to help. If we have an understanding of church as a place where we meet people who we're comfortable with - people just like us, then again, we've got it dead wrong. Church, if it's functioning well, should be **the most diverse** group of people you'd find **anywhere**.

My friends, as we work together to make decisions about how to integrate and improve our worship space, Jesus again draws our attention beyond ourselves and our comforts and our preferences, reminding us that **the most important** thing is that all those people out there - rich, poor, healthy, sick, happy, sad, suffering,

lonely, unemployed, odd, different, even **strange** - they should **all** feel the warmest welcome here among us. So what about **our** feast? What would Jesus say about how inviting **we** are? Who really feels welcome here? Do **we** really believe that we're welcoming, and if so, are we willing to invite people here **ourselves**? **Amen.**