

“The Man Who Came to Dinner”

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The movie *The Man Who Came to Dinner* tells the story of Sheridan Whiteside, an egotistical radio host in the 1940s who condescends to have dinner in the home of the Stanley family while on a lecture tour of Ohio. A prominent family in the community, the Stanleys at first consider Whiteside’s acceptance of their dinner invitation a major coup, since having such a famous person in their home will make them the talk of the town. But what they consider a dream scenario soon turns into a nightmare for the Stanley family; on his way into their house, Whiteside slips and falls on the ice on their front steps, breaking his hip and forcing him to recuperate in their house. He quickly becomes the worst type of houseguest imaginable: he takes over the entire household with a combination of threats, intimidation, an acid-tongued wit, going so far as to exile the Stanleys to the second floor. When he finally recovers toward the end of the film, the family is relieved to see Whiteside leave – until a final twist in the plot leaves them right back where they started, regretting their invitation to this man who came to dinner – and never left.

There are many reasons why we might invite a person to dinner. They may be a member of our family or a friend with whom we enjoy sharing meals and times together. It may be a new neighbor who we want to welcome to the neighborhood, or a guest who is visiting from out of town. If it is a special occasion – such as a wedding reception or an anniversary celebration – we may invite a large group of guest to share in the festivities. But they may also be times when, like the Stanley family, we invite a prominent person whose presence at our time will boost our status before others. Newspapers used to feature society columns that would report on famous persons who were guests in the homes of prominent families in the community, and such articles would raise their esteem in the eyes of others. In this age of social media, people may post photos on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter of meals with persons whose presence gives those at the table with them a certain cache, showing others that they have a significance that it is implied is greater than others. For some people, the persons who are seated at the table are more important than the occasion for the meal or what is being served.

The manner in which guests are invited to meals is not merely a modern phenomenon; in ancient Israel eating was a significant social occasion, important social ceremonies in which little was left to change. People would notice where one ate, with whom one ate, whether one washed before eating, and where one sat to eat. All these matters determined one’s social position; the Roman author Pliny the Younger recorded the discriminatory meal practices of the era in one of his letters:

- “Some very elegant dishes were served up to himself and a few more of the company; while those who were placed before the rest were cheap and paltry. He had apportioned in small flagons three different sorts of wine; but you are not to suppose it was that the guests might take their choice: on the contrary, that they might not choose at all. One was for himself and me; the next for his friends of lower order (for you must know that he measures out his friendship according to the degrees of quality); and the third for his own freed-men and mine.”

A meal with a distinguished guest, such as a prophet or teacher, would also have been an occasion for conversation that might be serious or witty – or both.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Jesus was invited to dine in the house of a leader of the Pharisees on the sabbath, “*they were watching him closely.*” (Luke 14:1). They may have been watching to see whether

Jesus would follow the prescribed norms of etiquette, which allowed both guest and host to be honored. They may have been watching to see how he interacted with his hosts and the other guests, and the nature of their conversations at table. They were watching him to see whether his behavior offered insights into his character, for *“it is in the small, apparently trivial act that character is most accurately reflected.”* (Plutarch).

But Jesus is hardly a model guest. When he notices that he is being watched, he confronts the lawyers and Pharisees at the table with the question *“is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?”* (14:3) and then heals a man, leaving the other guests speechless. When he notices how the guests choose for themselves the places of honor, Jesus exposes their maneuvering with direct words drawn from the book of Proverbs: *“Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”* (Proverbs 25:6-7). Since one’s position at a table determined one’s status and importance, those who were seeking such positions of esteem would often seek to be closer to the host or prominent guests; but honor is not gained by seizing prominence but must be given by others. But Jesus is not merely coaching the guests on how to play the game of gaining public recognition, a strategy for using false humility as a vehicle to gain what one desires. In teaching them to take *“the lowest place”* (14:10), those who had been following Jesus would have remembered his teaching that *“some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last”* (13:30). The word “honor” (*doxa*) is usually translated “glory” (as in “doxology”), and it points hearers beyond the recognition they may receive from the others present to the glory that belongs to God – and that only God can give. Jesus is speaking not only of the table fellowship that his followers are sharing in the present but also of the future that points beyond the immediate situation to the reversal of values that is characteristic of the economy of God’s kingdom, where *“all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* (14:11). The humility that grows out of this context of faith *“is a quality of life open to persons who know that their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers but by the certainty that God has accepted them.”* (Alan Culpepper).

After addressing the guests who were battled for the best seats in the house, Jesus turns his attention to his host, because hosts are no more free from the quest for recognition than are guests (which is what to the Stanley family into trouble when they invited Sheridan Whiteside into their home). The four groups that Jesus teaches should not be invite are those who are most often invited: friends, brothers and sisters, relatives, and neighbors; Jesus cautions against inviting these guests *“in case they might invite you in return, and you would be repaid.”* (14:12). Following this accepted practice of hospitality meant living in accordance with the Greco-Roman reciprocity ethic or *do ut des* mentality, whereby friends, whereby friends, who have all things in common, come to one another’s aid in the hope that when they are down on their luck their friend will come to their aid. In the ethic that Jesus teaches that is at the heart of the kingdom of God, people from different walks of life and from different nations are like friends as they have all things in common (Luke later reports that *“the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”* – Acts 4:32). “Hospitality” literally means “love of a stranger” (*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”* – Hebrews 13:2), welcoming those who are in no position to serve as host in return. *“The community and sharing of life and bread that takes places at table is too sacred to be perverted for private advantage.”* (Culpepper). Therefore, *“when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”* (14:13). Such persons were explicitly forbidden to serve as priests (*“For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand...”* – Leviticus 21:18-19), and were barred from entry into the Qumran community:

- “And let no person smitten with any human impurity whatever enter the Assembly of God. And every person smitten with these impurities, unfit to occupy a place in the midst of the congregation, and every (person) smitten in the flesh, paralysed in his feet or hands, lame or blind or deaf, or dumb or

smitten in the flesh with a blemish visible to the eye, or any aged person that totters and is unable to stand firm in the midst of the congregation: let these persons not enter.”

Jesus advises against inviting the powerful and well-to-do because they might return the invitation, conforming to an ethic of human origin. Instead, those who live according to the ethic of the kingdom of God should invite those who have never had such a meal, would never return the favor, and who will never be our superiors. The matter of blessing and honor has been lifted from the praise of others to the praise of God. *“God is ultimately the only one who can bless us and whose praise matters.”* (Culpepper).

Jesus’ teachings are not merely instructions on proper etiquette for disciples, a sort of “Emily Post for Christians.” They are lessons that are rooted in how we understand our relationship with God and with others. It reminds us that we do not gain our place in the household of God through our own efforts or merits; our place at the Lord’s Table is not something we earned, or did we receive it as a repayment for something we may have done. Our place in the Kingdom of God comes purely through God’s gracious act; God freely bestows all blessings upon us *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (Small Catechism). Indeed, not only have we not earned or merited our place in the household of God, but we had done everything possible to be denied entry; for *“God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us ... For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”* (Romans 5:8, 10). There is already a place for us at the table, one that was set for us from the moment God claimed us as God’s children through Holy Baptism, in which *“we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). We need not strive for the position of honor, nor extend hospitality to another person in the hope that it will be repaid to us; our place in the household of God is already set, as is *“the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”* (1 Peter 1:4-5). The gift of grace that is ours in our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection calls us to *“not be conformed to this world,”* and its emphasis on social status and reciprocity, but to *“be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:1).

- “We live in an atmosphere choked with the fumes of ungrace. Grace comes from outside, as a gift and not an achievement. How easily it vanishes from our dog-eat-dog, survival-of-the-fittest, look-out-for-number-one world.” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Freed from the need to gain status or honor for ourselves, we are free to welcome others to join us at the table our Lord has prepared for all people. The grace that welcomes us and assures us of our place in the household of God *“is a quality of life open to persons who know that their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers but by the certainty that God has accepted them.”* (Culpepper). Everyone has a place in the household of God and in the table of the Lord; we no longer see other persons as a means to an end but for who they are as sons and daughters of God. We invite persons not because we might gain something from their presence, but invite them to join with us in sharing the blessings of the one who invites us solely because of God’s steadfast love. Likewise, we do not exclude any person or put them in an inferior place; for in Christ there are no longer any distinctions: *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28).

In her book *Unfettered Hope*, Marva Dawn offers a prayer that God will free us from the bondage of striving and excluding so that we might embrace the gracious gift of God’s love and acceptance and share this gift of divine hospitality with others:

- “Gracious God, our only hope is in your forgiveness. May your mercy free us from the bondage to envy, wrongful desires, insatiable greed, and the idolatry of commodities. Empower us by your love to love our neighbors with a willingness to join with them in their sufferings – until the day when our dreams are unfettered in your completed plan to make the cosmos whole again. Amen.”

When Sheridan Whiteside was “the man who came to dinner,” the Stanley family found themselves trapped in a nightmare that compromised their freedom, drained their bank account, and publicly exposed them to humiliation and ridicule. But when our Lord Jesus Christ is “the man who comes to dinner,” when he is in our midst when we gather in God’s household and take our place at the Lord’s Table, the result is freedom, abundance, and blessing – for us and for all people. May our prayer be the prayer that many of us share when we take our place at the table where we know we are welcomed and where we belong: *“Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.”* Amen.