

"The Man Who Came to Dinner"

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Man Who Came to Dinner is a cautionary tale that warns of the consequences of inviting certain persons to dine in one's home. It is the story of the Stanleys, a prominent family in their Ohio hometown, who learn about an upcoming visit by Sheridan Whiteside, an opinionated and arrogant radio host, and see it as an opportunity to raise their social status in the community by inviting him to their home for lunch. Whiteside reluctantly agrees, mostly at the urging of his staff who see this as an opportunity to connect with "middle America"; but on his way into their home, Whiteside slips and falls on their icy steps and breaks his hip, becoming their unexpected houseguest and causing chaos for everyone. What seemed like an opportunity for social gain for the Stanleys turned out to be a nightmare all because of this "man who came to dinner."

Meals have far greater importance than merely satisfying our appetites: they are occasions for celebrations such as wedding or anniversary parties; gathering of family and friends for holiday feasts; and banquets at organizational gatherings. They can also be arenas where one's standing in the community or in one's social circle can be enhanced, either by securing an invitation to an exclusive event or inviting prominent people to one's own table. Being seen at table with the "right" people is an opportunity to advance for those who see such occasions as desirous steps on the "ladder" to advancement.

Inviting and being invited to the "right" dinners is not an exclusive feature in some modern social circles; meals in New Testament times were also important social ceremonies in which little was left to chance. Throughout his Gospel, Luke reports on people who noticed where one ate and with whom one ate ("The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to [Jesus'] disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" – 5:30), whether one washed before eating ("The Pharisees were amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner." – 11:38), and where one sat to eat. All these matters determined one's social position:

- "Some very elegant dishes were served up to himself and a few more of his company; while those which 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." – Pliny the Younger.

In today's Gospel lesson, "*Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath*" (14:1). This invitation to dine in the home of a prominent religious leader on the holiest day of the week evokes echoes of other occasions when Jesus is a guest in the home of a Pharisee ("One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table." – 7:36). Inviting a person to dine at one's table meant that you accepted that person as an equal; as Jesus took his place at the Pharisee's table, the other guests "were watching him closely" to see whether he would follow the prescribed norms of etiquette which allowed both guest and host to be honored. But Jesus is also observing their behavior, especially "when he noticed how the guests chose

the places of honor" (14:7) and decides to use this occasion as a moment to continue his teaching on life in the Kingdom of God. Luke identifies Jesus' words as a "parable," a clue to his readers that this is far more than an etiquette lesson but a teaching on life as a disciple of Christ; for "*it is in the small, apparently trivial act that character is most accurately reflected ... in defining life in the presence of God.*" (Fred Craddock). When Jesus notes how the guests choose for themselves the "places of honor," he exposes their maneuvering in words drawn from 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.

Honor is not gained by seizing prominence; it must be given by others. Jesus' counsel that his followers should "*go and sit at the lowest place*" (14:10) should not be seen as a strategy to gain the honored place that one desires, a form of "false humility"; rather, it echoes his teaching that "*some are last who would be first, and some are first who will be last*" (13:30). "Honor" (*doxa*) is usually translated as "glory," and it points Jesus' listeners beyond the recognition that they receive from others to a glory that belongs to God – and that only God can give. Our place in the kingdom of God and at the table of the Lord depends not on our striving for a more prestigious place; it is a gift that God bestows freely on all who receive this gift with thanksgiving and humility, who heed the call of the apostle Peter to "*humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.*" (1 Peter 5:6). In another reversal of conventional wisdom that is typical of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God, he warns his table mates that "*all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*" (14:11).

- "Humility is not to be feigned as a strategy for recognition. On the contrary, humility 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.

In the second part of Jesus' "table talk," he turns his attention to the host, who is exposed as being as prone to the quest for recognition as are his guests. Hosting could be an act by which one person gained power over others and put them in his debt, established a type of *quid pro quo* relationship in which one expected a benefit in return for a benefit that is extended to another person. In such a transactional relationship, "*a host who expects a return on his or her behavior will not offer service or food to those who cannot repay, and so guest lists consist of persons who are able to return the favor.*" (Craddock). But life in the Kingdom of God is not based on a *quid pro quo* relationship in which we receive God's blessings only after we have given something to God in return; the Reign of God is rooted in God's gracious, steadfast love, the sure and certain knowledge that "*a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law*" (Romans 3:28) and that "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8). Because our place at the Lord's Table is due solely to the grace of God, we in turn must freely invite others to the table with no expectations of *quid pro quo* – in fact, we should invite those who could not repay us even if they wanted to: "*When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind*" (14:13). Such persons would never have been invited as guests at any "respectable" person's table, because they were persons who were explicitly forbidden to serve as priests according to the Torah ("No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's blessing by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God." – Leviticus 21:21) 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, paralyzed in his feet or hands, lame or blind or deaf, or dumb or smitten in his 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 does not merely prohibit inviting those in a position to benefit us if our reason for inviting them is to curry their favor. He advises not to invite the powerful or well-to-do because they *might* return the favor. Instead, we should invite those who have no means of entering into a *quid pro quo* relationship because in so doing “*you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous*” (14:14). God is ultimately the only one who can bless us or whose praise matters.

- “This story calls out our propensity toward transactional faith. We expect God to move about in our economies that are dependent on proof of worth and jobs well done. We assume God will choose to maintain a relationship with us based on our ministry performance. But then we forget a key theological premise in Luke – God’s measure of membership in the Kingdom has everything to do with how God sees us and not how we see ourselves.” – Karoline Lewis.

Our Gospel lesson ends before we hear the response of one of the dinner guests who, “*on hearing this, said to him, ‘Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’*” (14:15). While we do not know what motivated this person to make such a declaration, it does point us to the good news that this “man who came to dinner” is sharing with us: that the meal that is offered by our Lord is one that is a true blessing, and is a blessing that is available to all. Our place at the Lord’s Table does not depend on our worthiness, or on what we can bring, or on what we do in return. It is based not on *quid pro quo* but on what we may call *God’s pro quo*, what God offers to all of us “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all*” (Luther, *Small Catechism*). Our place at the Lord’s Table depends not on what we have done from God but on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Our status comes not from out striving to gain an honored position for ourselves, but comes through out being baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, in which we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism). Our identity is not something that we enhance through whom we invite and who invites us; it is that which identifies us as “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). Knowing that we are children of God and heirs of the blessings of the Kingdom of God liberates us from the bondage of social climbing, of the need to secure our status in the eyes of others – because we have the most exalted status that anyone could desire through what God has bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. This good news “*can free us from the necessity of succeeding in our culture’s contests of power and esteem ... so that we may be free to create human community and enjoy the security of God’s grace.*” (Culpepper).

The assurance that our place at the Lord’s Table is ours through God’s liberating grace also calls us to freely welcome others to the table without any expectation of *quid pro quo* as we were freely welcomed with no strings attached. We cannot put a price on what God means to be a free gift, not can we place restrictions or barriers around what God desires to be open to all:

- “I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

The Man Who Came to Dinner did not provide what the Stanley family had expected; on the contrary, his presence turned out to be a major disruption that probably soured them on ever inviting such a person into their home again. But “the man who comes to dinner” when we gather at the table he sets for us always provides what he promises and always blesses and strengthens us by his presence. Our lives are always blessed when we gather together praying “*Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.*” Amen.