

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”

I’ve never had to do this, but I’ll bet it’s a real challenge: arranging the seating at a formal dinner—something like a wedding reception. Giving thought to who sits with whom, where their table is located relative to the guests of honor and considering the order in which the tables will be served... all of that entails a complex social calculus that frankly eludes me. “Place cards and pecking orders” would be the flip way to talk about this, and I considered that as a sermon title. But that’s too easy. Most of us really do notice this stuff.

More familiar to me is the world of meetings. In the typical week I probably attend a dozen or so meetings of various sizes and configurations. If the group is fairly new it may take a while, but sooner or later folks settle into what amount to assigned seats. If there is a single configuration of a table or tables, commonly there is a boy’s side and a girl’s side, just as in grade school, until it gets close to meeting time and the latecomers have a severely limited choice of seats... then, somewhat awkwardly, the pattern breaks down. Every once in a while somebody will get creative on us and change where everybody sits. Commonly this happens when there is a change of leadership in a group and the new administration wants to send the signal that there’s a new sheriff in town. Or at a staff meeting somebody on the staff will decide that we’re in a rut and sits in a different spot. This *never* happens without comment. We get into a comfort zone, we get a sense of where we belong, and we notice when somebody messes with it.

So we pay attention to these things; but they were far greater issues in Jesus’ day. Religious laws specified that those who were clean could not associate with the unclean without becoming contaminated. In this case “clean” and “unclean” are terms related not to hygiene, but to ritual purity. The righteous did not associate with gentiles or with “sinners,” particularly the conspicuously sinful like prostitutes or tax collectors. And so folks like the Pharisees in this morning’s lesson would more or less take turns inviting each other to exclusive gatherings of the ritually pure.

In this isolated instance, Jesus is on the guest list. That’s interesting. He is frequently criticized for keeping company with sinners and tax collectors and foreigners. Why has he been invited to this gathering of Pharisees? Perhaps it is because, as some scholars believe, Jesus himself is a Pharisee. But more likely Jesus is invited so that he can give an account of himself. “They were watching

him closely,” Luke tells us. They want Jesus to confirm their worst suspicions about him: sort of like a first dinner with prospective in-laws.

The encounter begins with Jesus paying close attention and naming what he sees—a particular gift of his. He notices what people do, often behavior that is so ingrained that they don’t notice it themselves. Here he observes “how the guests chose the places of honor.” They all behave as though they are the most special people invited to this gathering. They elbow their way toward the head table as though honor were something one could seize, wrenching it from the grasp of other pretenders.

So Luke says that Jesus told them a “parable.” But it’s hardly a parable, a story with a clear and direct point. It’s more like a wisdom discourse that he offers, a page right out of *Emily Post*. It sounds like a careful contrivance on how to end up with the most honor... or at least the least shame. If you hold back from the place of honor and the host or hostess wants you closer, they’ll invite you near and everybody will notice. But if you’re too close to begin with (“Do you mind? That spot is reserved for somebody really important...”) then you’ll be publicly humiliated. So hang back and play it cool. It sounds as though Jesus is teaching the Pharisees something they already know: how to be calculating and shrewd. Is he really playing along with them... or is he making fun of them? I can’t really decide, but I think there’s a clue in where he goes next.

What follows is even more outrageous. Hey man, you’re getting this all wrong! If you want to rack up points with God, don’t keep inviting each other to dinner to regularly zero out the social balance sheet. Invite somebody who can’t repay you! Lend your social capital to somebody you’ll really shame with indebtedness because they couldn’t possibly afford to invite you in return. Hang out with the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind—people generally thought to be out of favor with God and regarded as unclean precisely because of their afflictions. And then Jesus says this: “you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” It turns out that in Jesus’ estimation these “undesirables” are God’s special people.

I think Jesus is being intentionally outrageous here: contrasting the Pharisees’ self-absorbed obsession with status with God’s passion for justice. When you jam the two concepts together like this you see how little they have to do with one another. The world of these particular Pharisees, built around their notions of righteousness and piety, is 180 degrees removed from the realm of God. If the Pharisees want to know what the realm of God will be like, they could begin by imagining a gathering completely different from their own. They could begin by understanding that the last will be first and the first will be

last; all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Take the world we know, turn it on its head, and you've got a good start.

Well, good for Jesus! He stuck it to those nasty old Pharisees once again, didn't he? Thank God we're not like them, right?

I'm not so sure. This is a hard teaching! We'd like not to think so, but we place an awful lot of stock in our social distinctions and their key indicators of dress and hygiene and grammar and education.

A story from some years ago comes to mind: the 1980's in Omaha (whew! It isn't about anybody here... not even me!). In the church I used to serve there was a regular attendee who consistently relied on the good graces of the congregation for transportation or for little kindnesses from time to time. And she was fortunate, because they were very gracious people. There was nothing formal about this, but they would sort of take turns driving her home or running little errands for her, helping out with groceries or medications... that sort of thing. She was pretty good at working the angles, and folks were pretty good about accommodating her and treating her with respect.

One particular Sunday she prevailed upon a woman of the congregation to drive her home in the big, white Cadillac that woman had driven to church. She was more than happy to oblige. It was a cold day. The owner of the Cadillac happened to have worn a mink coat to church. On the way home the woman receiving the ride asked if they could stop at a convenience store to get some milk and a loaf of bread. Of course. When they pulled into the parking lot of the store the woman asked, "Would you mind going in for me and getting the groceries? My arthritis is really bothering me today." No problem. "Here," she said as she fumbled in her purse, "You can pay with these." She handed the driver some food stamps.

You need to get the full mental picture here. A woman pulls into a Seven Eleven in a big white Cadillac, gets out with her 1980's hairdo, big bug-eyed glasses and mink coat to walk into the store and buy bread and milk with food stamps.

I'll just let that roll around in your head for a few moments... there isn't much I can add, really. I'll leave it there for two reasons. First of all, I really don't remember what she did. I would like to think that she walked into that store, brazen as you please, and paid for that bread and milk with the food stamps and didn't give a hoot what anybody thought, got back in that car and didn't say a word. That's what I'd like to think, but I really don't remember

what she did, or whether I even had the courage to ask her when she recounted the story.

The second reason I need to leave the story right there is that I really have no idea what I would have done in her place. I want to think that I truly believe that I live more in Jesus' world than in the world of the Pharisees; but when it comes right down to it I'm not so certain.

In some ways this is a very harsh word Jesus delivers to some folks who we've trained ourselves to think had it coming—uptight religious types very different from ourselves. But how prepared are we really to deal with a world in which all that we have striven for in terms of wealth and status and respectability doesn't matter a bit? And everything we do to make ourselves stand out in a crowd, it turns out, just separates us from the banquet at which Jesus is the host: the banquet where people matter not because of their achievements or social standing but because of God's gracious invitation.

As Bill Coffin used to say, "God's love does not seek merit, God's love bestows merit. We're not invited because we're worthy; we're worthy because we're invited."

If that seems a harsh word, so be it. For what is gained is far greater than what is lost. We lose a false sense of superiority. We gain a love that sees us without illusions and welcomes us with open arms. When we rely on our social cues for our sense of worth, we already have whatever reward we're going to get. When we respond to God's summons to come as we are, we discover the wonders of God's amazing grace.

Guess who's coming to dinner... everybody.

Amen

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