

A Special Invitation

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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Ever notice how the first thing you do after getting a new haircut is go fishing? Not with a rod and reel but with words? You might be able to get what you're after with just a single cast. You look your family member in the eye and ask, "well?" Less baitable persons might have to be lured along a bit further: "Oh, I don't know if this looks very good. What do you think?" I caught myself doing that just a week ago after a much-needed trip to the hairdresser. And I must admit what I wanted to hear as my family came over for dinner were compliments. That's what I was fishing for. You and I both know that this is not what being humble is all about.

Nobody likes to be tagged a show-off or braggart. But every one of us desperately craves to be praised and complimented and admired. So sometimes we appear to humble ourselves only so that we may enjoy the praises and exaltations that such behavior elicits from others. This type of humbleness is not the real thing

However, in today's scripture Jesus is making a point about the real way to be humble. Acting humbly without expecting any rewards or praise or compliments was the very message Jesus urged the other guests and hosts at the banquet to heed! ----the banquet Jesus was invited to was really the first-century equivalent of an elite private club's dining room. The point of being there was that you had achieved success and social status high enough to get you in the door. But just attending is not enough. Eating is not the function of this meal---seeing and being seen is the real driving force behind everyone's attendance.

Surprisingly, a special banquet invitation has been extended to Jesus by “the leader of the Pharisees.” But Jesus, as we all well know is a unique type of guest. When Jesus speaks, he stirs things up! His words invite the other guests and the hosts to think in a very counter-cultural way. One of the most shocking aspects of Jesus’ advice to his host was his admonition to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Jesus is speaking about meeting people where they are, as they are, and loving them without reservation---NOW! Not when they change, or get their acts together, or buy a nice suit, but NOW! This is gracious extravagant hospitality, God’s way, and we are called to make it our own.

Jesus says “take the lowest seat,” “identify with the lowest people,” “don’t expect a reward or even a return on your investment.” How different from and how contrary to the usual success strategies!! From Jesus’ point of view, what others think about us and how we see ourselves matters less than what God thinks of us.

Human measures of success rely on cutthroat competition and “survival of the fittest.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, was saddened by this self-centered drive toward success, and sadly concluded more than 100 years ago: “We are great by exclusion, grasping, and egotism. Our success takes from all what it gives to one. It is a haggard, malignant, careworn running for luck.”

Emerson went on to note 3 qualities he deemed marks of true “success:

- 1) the ability to discern and appreciate beauty;
- 2) the ability to see the best in other people;
- 3) a commitment to leaving the world a better place, either by doing one’s own work better or by making it easier for others to do theirs.

Are these our goals when we make scrambling for only the “best” seats, the “best” friends, the “best” places to be seen, the “best” church in town, the driving force in our lives???

Labor Day compels us to face the perennial problems associated with making a living and making a life. We often think that the persons who receive the highest wages for their labor are more important and valuable than others. But Jesus' emphasis is not on what we receive from our labor, but the faithful work that we do.

Not too long ago I read a great book with a one-word title: Respect by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. I would like to share with you the heart of her message. In this time of back-to-school busyness, it's good to know what her father said about his work as a teacher..."

"It was much later that I realized Dad's secret. He gained respect by giving it. He talked and listened to the fourth-grade kids in Spring Valley who shined shoes the same way he talked and listened to a bishop or a college president. He was seriously interested in who you were and what you had to say." Care.... Respect.... When we care about connecting, we can move mountains!

For each of us, we will receive invitations to birthday parties, weddings, holiday gatherings, outdoor barbecues, or some other special occasion. Some require formal replies, some do not. All ask us whether we will accept the invitation and under what conditions.

Today's scripture asks us similar questions. Living water, finest wheat, honey from the rock, and an open table are images of the life God offers. We are invited to be a generous and hospitable people whose very lives are "a special invitation" to others to experience God's inclusive and compassionate love for everyone.

As we come to the table on this Sunday before Labor Day, let us hear the words of Jesus: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the son of man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

By accepting the invitation to this Table we have made the choice to accept God's
compassionate love. As we receive the bread and the cup, we renew and affirm our relationship
to Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives. We offer ourselves, our lives, our work so we may
serve and become channels of God's reconciling love
through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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