

**Date: Sunday August 29, 2010**

**Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7-14**

**Title: “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”**

**The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Much of life is about what we can get. It should be about giving in the same way God gives to us – without expectation of return.**

**The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God willing hosts us now and forever and expects nothing in return.**

**(Remember, it’s all about God!)**

This may be a game. I don’t know for sure if it is or not. If it is I can understand why. If not, it should be. Let’s say you are throwing a dinner party and can invite any six people, not counting friends and family; who would you invite to dinner? You can invite anyone – no restrictions. This question has continually intrigued me since it was first posed to me. I have a hard time narrowing down my guest list to just six and the guests change depending on my mood. But some of the people I consistently think about inviting would be President Barack Obama, author David McCullough, talk show host Kelly Ripa, The Reverend William Willimon, Dr. Jennifer Ashton from The Early Show, and Jesus Christ. A couple of alternates would be the actress Drew Barrymore and Journalist Anderson Cooper. Who would you invite?

This question of who we would invite is at the heart of today’s passage from Luke. We find our way to a dinner party in today’s passage hosted by a Pharisee with many well known folks from that ancient time attending. Jesus is also a guest.

Jesus was a guest at any number of social events and dinners. I'm sure he was a popular guest. We know he didn't mince words and said whatever was on his mind. That can make for an interesting guest and a thought provoking evening, to say the least.

So at this dinner party described in Luke, Jesus notices how people are aligning themselves at the table. Seating is a crucial factor at dinner parties - who is sitting by who and why? As attendees, we don't have to think too much about where we will sit because each seat usually has a name card indicating where we should sit. As a host though, we put great thought into who is sitting where as we strategically place the name cards. But in Jesus' day there was no assigned seating with name cards. That's because Jesus lived in a society that had a mutually agreed-upon pecking order. Each person, because of family, net worth, or employment, had a place on the pre-determined societal ladder, and it was each person's responsibility to know on which rung of that ladder they belonged.

Here's how it worked. At each table there were seats of honor, near the host, at the center of the table. The further down the table one sat, the further down the social ladder for that person. The closer one could sit to the host, the more prestigious the societal position (McLean). So where did Jesus sit at the table?

Well, we don't know for sure from this passage where he sat, but we do know that when Jesus saw the guests jockeying for the best seats, he suggested they'd be better off sitting at the far end of the table. If they sat up front, someone more distinguished might come to the table, and the ones upfront might be asked to move

toward the other end. That would be embarrassing! So, instead, Jesus suggests, the guests would be better off sitting in the peanut gallery. Then, if they're lucky, the host might extend an invitation to come up to the center of the table where one would be a recognized guest (McLean). That would be an honor.

I saw something like this happen once. Several years ago I was attending a Hy-Vee luncheon at the corporate headquarters. Dwight Vredenburg, son of one of Hy-Vee's founders and a wonderful man, was chairman of the board and the CEO. There were thirty of us at the luncheon and five folks from the headquarters staff including Dwight. There were 9 tables set up in a big "U" shape and everyone knew that Dwight would sit in the chair at the very middle of the arrangement – everyone except one poor soul. It came time for lunch, we were invited to be seated, and I watched as this person sat in Dwight's chair. I also saw Dwight out of the corner of my eye as he headed toward his chair. It became clear that he noticed someone was sitting there. In a very unassuming manner, which was Dwight's style, he stopped, turned around, acted as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on, and just started visiting with one of the other guests. Another staff person went over, tapped the shoulder of the person sitting in Dwight's chair, and whispered in their ear. I watched as their face turned red, they got up, and quickly made their way to the far end of the table. Then, after a few moments, Dwight quietly made his way to the front as if nothing had happened. I just sat down in one of the middle seats on the side, but not before asking, "Is anyone sitting here?"

Now Dwight didn't sit at the head of the table because he wanted to look

good. He sat there because we recognized him as the head of our company and we had honor for him in that role. True acclaim comes from others, not from what we're able to generate on our own behalf. That's the point Jesus is trying to make in today's passage.

Robert Coles, a child psychologist at Harvard University, tells of the time he went to visit Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement. He walked into a room where Day was speaking with another woman, and Coles had to wait for this conversation to end before he could meet with her. The conversation dragged on. Finally, Dorothy Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. Then Day got up, walked over to Coles, and said, "Are you waiting to talk to one of us?" Now that's a pretty humble response.

Another man observed that in his early years he had been arrogant, but that he had overcome that and now he was faultless. The elusive thing about humility is, as soon as we realize we've got it, we've lost it! Humility is not about thinking less of ourselves - it's thinking about ourselves less (McLean).

So back to the dinner party. A gracious host, as we imagine Jesus' host was, made sure all of his obligations were fulfilled. He would have been generous with his meal, gracious toward his guests, and concerned for their comfort, their enjoyment, and their fellowship.

Having said all that, we can imagine that Jesus and the other guests had a wonderful time that evening. On their way out the door, a typical comment from

the guests to the host would have been, “Say, how about dropping by my place sometime.” A host typically extended an invitation to those who were in a position to return the favor. Jesus saw how the guest lists were drawn up: they included only those who were sure to host in return. Being a host put the guests in debt to the host. The guests were obliged to return the favor (McLean).

So in a statement that would give Miss Manners the jitters Jesus gives his host some party hosting advice. “When you throw a party, don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors...”—four standard kinds of guests—“...lest they invite you in return and you be repaid. Instead, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind...”—quite a different four-fold guest list—“...and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection” (Luke 14:12-14). In other words, to demonstrate true hospitality, offer it to those who can never return the favor. That way, it’s not done with any self-serving motives, but out of pure, heart-felt hospitality and humility.

I doubt very much that Jesus meant to suggest that people shouldn’t enjoy time with friends. In fact, in my research this week I found one commentator suggesting that Jesus was a real “party animal.” I don’t know that I would apply that description to him, but let’s be clear; Jesus enjoyed social time with friends. Think wedding and wine. But today isn’t so much about the party, it’s about God’s ideas for drawing up the invitation list; God invites those to his table who can’t possible return the favor of God’s glorious grace.

Jesus invites us to do the same. On this first Sunday after concluding the Food

4 Kids summer ministry, a ministry where we are blessed by the presence of those who attend, it is appropriate that we are called once again to live God's Kingdom in the here and now by showing the same generosity to others that is shown to us – a generosity of radical hospitality with an acknowledgement that it can never be repaid and the understanding that there is no expectation it ever will be. Today's good news is that God is hosting a dinner party for all eternity and we are on the guest list. Let's start getting ready and let's pray.

Almighty God,

For the outstanding hospitality and graciousness that you share with all your children, we offer our thanks. We strive to care for others in the same fashion you care for us – to be a blessing – given without any thought of what we might receive in return. So we pray, Amen.

Offering: So here we go. Let's give without thinking about what we get in return. Let's just give. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, we trust in your acceptance and blessing of these gifts and your guidance as we put them to use for your church. So we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth children of God blessed by the love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the foundational strength of Jesus Christ our Lord. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

McLean, Haydn Rev.; Lectionary Homiletics; [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com); 2010.