

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
"Invitations"  
Luke 14:1,7-14  
9/1/13

We hear a lot of stories in the Bible about Jesus spending time with the poor and outcasts. But today, we hear about a time when Jesus was invited for dinner to the home of a very important man in Jerusalem, a wealthy man.

This man was a leader of the Pharisees and the very first verse of today's Gospel, gives us a clue why he invited Jesus. In that first verse, we hear that the Pharisees were watching Jesus very closely. They viewed Jesus suspiciously.

Up until that point, they had heard all kinds of stories about Jesus, but they wanted to see and hear for themselves. And of course, Jesus took that opportunity to teach them, and us something important about the Kingdom of God.

You can just picture in your mind what happened that night. Here was Jesus, a guest at a large dinner party, in one of the fanciest homes in Jerusalem. The host was an important man—a leader with influence, a person with connections.

And that evening there were people everywhere. There was no shortage of guests, and no shortage of people who were more than glad to be invited. They knew it was helpful to have other people know that this host, this important man, was their friend.

The hors d'oeuvres were nearly gone, greetings had been exchanged, and it came time to take a seat at the table. I imagine Jesus was probably in a conversation with two or three others and he saw them begin to get edgy as the "good" places filled up - the places closest to the host.

With a wry smile, and maybe a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Jesus got their attention with a story, the one recorded in today's Gospel about the guests at the wedding banquet and the virtue of humility.

The question Jesus' story raised, was this:  
"Am I going to be comfortable... regardless where I end up sitting?"

In other words,  
"Am I secure in who I am, and in my relationship with the host?  
"Will I enjoy the banquet even if I am not seated in a place of honor?"  
These aren't easy questions for any of us.

As Jesus did, we could use this story about the wedding banquet as a larger parable about life.

It's a parable that raises questions about our humility and self-esteem.

- If we need to run to get the best seats, it may indicate arrogance or insecurity.
- If we need to hide in the back rows, it may be our low self-esteem."<sup>1</sup>

Or there's a third possibility. Sometimes taking the lowest seat is just a form of false humility. We really think we deserve a better place, but we want to pretend like we're humble, so that others will notice and tell us how great we really are.

We've all seen examples of these three kinds of behavior.

We've all seen "show offs"

... people who love to get attention.

We've seen people with low self-esteem

...people who have a hard time taking any compliment,

...people who have been so mistreated that they have a hard time believing anything good about themselves.

And we've seen those who are falsely humble.

We recognize these behaviors when we see it in others, but it's much harder to see it in ourselves.

The reality is: at one time or another, we have probably been all three of these people.

So what is Jesus saying to us in today's Gospel?

First of all,

Jesus is simply describing reality...he says,

"those who exalt themselves will be humbled."

He's saying, "Save yourself the trouble. Don't put yourself up on a pedestal. Pride comes before the fall."

Now that doesn't mean, that ambition is always negative.

Ambition certainly can be used to accomplish something worthwhile

...like the ambition to do well in your work, so that you can better serve others

...or the ambition to study and get good grades so that you can pursue a career that's needed in our society.

On the other hand, ambition when it's focused on yourself, is not positive.

Any ambition that is not for the purpose of benefiting others, even if it brings success, will leave a person feeling hollow or empty.

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on the reflections of Rev. Rick Foss

Jesus is telling us today, that the true path to success, is not becoming a self-made man or woman...but rather, focusing our energies on the simple commandment, "to love your neighbor even as you love yourself."

I know of a congregation in the inner city of one of this nation's larger metropolitan areas. Some in the congregation became concerned about the plight of the homeless. So the church began a soup kitchen that operated three days a week. Soon that church was feeding over sixty people for lunch, three days a week.

Now at this same church, it was their custom every other Sunday to have a congregational meal after worship.

This was a meal for the members and the occasional visitor. Then someone said, "Why don't we invite the folks who gather here during the week to gather with us on Sunday too?"

And there was debate. It was one thing to "feed the hungry," another thing to invite them to your table to eat with you!

Then someone flipped open a Bible, turned to a particular text in the Gospel of Luke, and read it.

The next thing that happened was a motion from the floor: "I move that we have a meal after church every Sunday and invite everyone to join us, especially the people on the street who show up here on weekdays."

The motion passed.  
And attendance at the church **doubled**.

So, what was the crucial passage that was read from Luke?  
It was today's Gospel from Luke 14.

Just imagine, if we took to heart the challenge Jesus delivered to the host in this passage.

At the end of today's reading: Jesus turned to his host and said, "When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends or brothers, or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return... but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:12-14a

The poor, handicapped, and lame were considered outcasts at that time. They were ignored socially and not welcomed in the local synagogues.

Just imagine if each one of us took Jesus' challenge seriously. What if we invited someone to dinner who was outside our social circles someone we didn't expect to repay us with a return invitation?

In Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus said,  
 "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?  
 Even the tax collectors...[ and pagans] are doing that?"<sup>3</sup>

Just imagine if we were even more the kind of church Jesus calls us to be? What if the first thing people associated with our congregation is that this is a place where everyone is welcome?

It's true the visitors that I've spoken with have all said that they experience a very warm and genuine welcome when they come here.

Lutherans are known for being friendly.  
 But wouldn't it be great if we were also known for our invitations?

Take next Sunday, for example.  
 We call it Rally Sunday, because it is the kick off for all of our fall ministries. On top of that, this year is also a Day of Service, when we will be packaging 10,000 meals for school feeding programs in countries like Haiti.

Wouldn't it be great if this place was filled to overflowing with guests and visitors ...people we reached out to, and invited?

Wouldn't it be great if instead of a typical Rally Sunday ...where we open our doors and say "Anyone who shows up is welcome" ...what if we went beyond that and invited friends and neighbors who do not have a church home?

Finally, here's something that's been weighing on my mind all week long. In a previous congregation I heard someone say that they were hoping for a group of new members who could really fill up the offering plates.

But listen to Jesus again,  
 "When you give a banquet, do not invite your friends or your relatives, or your rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and repay you. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

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<sup>3</sup> Mt. 5:46

What would that look like here in RSM?

If our Rally Sunday worship services are the banquet Jesus is talking about, who are we being called to go out and invite?

Who are the forgotten, the ignored members of our community?

Some churches love to take in prominent and wealthy members of the community. But let me share a challenge with you.

Who would be willing to join me in visiting some of the forgotten or ignored members of our community... people who need Jesus, just like you and me.

If you're willing to do that, talk to me after the service this morning.

I know it doesn't sound like what Lutherans usually do but I'm pretty sure that's what the Gospel is calling us to do.

And whatever God calls us to do, He will give us the strength to do it. Amen.