



GUESTS OF HONOR

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“Guests of Honor” | Luke 14:1, 7-14 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Jesus is such a buzzkill sometimes. Don’t get me wrong, he has the potential to be an amazing party guest. I mean, water into wine? Sweet.

But not at today’s party. Here he is, invited to a prominent party – a guest of a leader of the Pharisees, Luke writes. This was very likely not the usual dinner gathering at the home of a friend – casually reclined around the table. This was a – get out your best robe, grab your bow ties and sparkly earrings, kind of an affair. Because in first-century culture, an invitation to dinner was not simply about enjoying some food together. There were social and economic implications – aspects of power and class. It was often a time of teaching or learning. It was far more than just simply eating a meal.

Thanks to Luke’s narrative, we know both sides of the party – Jesus, (motion left) honored guest; wealthy religious leaders (motion right) keeping an eye out on him.

And so here’s Jesus, up at the head table, so to speak – all eyes on him, partly because he’s a guest of honor; but also because it’s the Sabbath, and he’s tested the Pharisees’ patience on so many sabbaths in the recent past. What will he do today? What will he say today? It’s a high-alert situation.

Jesus is after all an up and coming rabbi, increasing his following, the next hot thing in first-century Judaism. And he was rubbing elbows with the rich and famous. Here he was, the guest of honor, headed to the head table, in the spot where everyone wants to be.

And that’s when he does what he tends to do, which is burst every bubble of the wanna-be culture. Wanna be rich? Only those who store up treasure in heaven will know the kingdom of God. Wanna be powerful? Only those who empty themselves of power will know the true power of God.

He looks around and sees all those people who have purposefully chosen places of honor – the most important tables filled in, the spots closest to the host, the places of prominence. “Why are you all vying for the top spots of honor?” Then he gives what sounds like a coaching session on how to gain respect... or maybe a lesson in false humility: instead of choosing the place of honor and having the host embarrassingly ask you to move to the lowest place, choose to sit in the lowest place, and then the host will ask you to move up to a higher spot. “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus juxtaposes self-exaltation – pride – conceit... with humility. Understand, humility is not about self-abasement or a false sense of self on either end of the self-esteem spectrum – I’m a terrible person; I’m just not that amazing. It’s not about being timid or feeling inferior. It is simply the opposite of conceit – the opposite of pride. It is acknowledging everybody’s place at the table without regard to our insistence on our own spot there, especially a spot of honor. It is granting dignity, respect, and belonging to all, and especially to those who might need an extra helping of inclusion.

Jesus’ teaching almost directly quotes Proverbs 25:6-7: “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 has a lot to say about arrogance and pride, the opposite of humility. Proverbs 16:5 says that all who are arrogant are “an abomination to the Lord.” Later in that same chapter is that famed verse: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Pride was, in the ancient world, the first of the deadly sins. It is the muddied crown jewel of that which can separate us most from God. Instead of arrogance, followers of Jesus are called to humility. As St. Augustine reflects: “Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.”

¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Clearly Jesus’ speech is a not a lesson in how to gain honor. Instead, it is a lesson on faithful living, acknowledging our place, and, more importantly, God’s place in the order of things. God at the top, God’s agenda of welcome and care, God’s power.

Here are two very distinct clues about how this is much more than a coaching session on how to save pride. First, the Greek word for honor is doxa – like doxology – and a more accurate translation than honor is glory. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor [or glory]... [instead] go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.”

By specifically choosing the word doxa, Jesus is addressing glory, an attribute given directly to God. All glory belongs to God – all honor is the Lord’s. In this way, Jesus is turning the advice on its head. It isn’t about a human party at all – it is a story of the Kingdom of God. The parable is about God, our host at every table.

And the only glory that matters is God’s glory, not our own. The only recognition that matters is God’s recognition, not that of humans. Jesus is speaking here of what we do for the kingdom of God – live with humility. Humility equalizes us, unites us, and honors all people.

In contrast, pride is the first thing that will divide us from one another. Pride is at root in all the things we are fighting against as a congregation as we seek to dismantle racism and care for the poor not through simple charity but by working against the many ways our culture creates systems designed to keep people poor. Pride would seek to tear down, divide, overpower. And in the kingdom of God we are called to unity, love, and compassion. Jesus is very clear that his kingdom is not of the world – that we are called to live differently.

The second clue that this is not simply a lesson in how to gain honor is when Jesus turns from the guests themselves. He moves from speaking to them about their choosing places of honor and turns to the host, giving his next speech on the kingdom of God: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Who invites the least of these when they throw a banquet? No, you invite your relatives, you check the guest list to make sure you have the *right* people on it. You might select people you wouldn’t normally hang with for an invite because it would be good for your business or good for your social connections to have them on board or because you want to honor them in some way.

Instead, Jesus says, invite the ones who never get asked to the dance. Invite the ones who have special needs or who can’t afford to go to parties. Invite the ones who are always left on the sidelines. And most especially, invite those who cannot repay you. This is how we live out the kingdom of God. These are the guests of honor.

The ones who are poor – who won’t be able to pay you back with an invite for dinner. The ones who are differently abled, who deserve dignity and community along with everyone else. The ones who lack vision – maybe literally – maybe who lack the ability to see how God is at work in the world, who lack vision for the kingdom, who are blind to God’s inclusive, unexpected, diverse, and welcoming love.

These are the ones to invite – the ones desperately in need of belonging. Pastor Charlie challenged us to invite someone to lunch or coffee this week – to extend an invitation of hospitality. Who are you inviting?

The good news Luke keeps trying to tell us about is the good news that all are already worthy and invited and belong in the kingdom of God. After this passage, Jesus tells another parable about a dinner party. The invitees keep RSVPing regrets, and so Jesus presses them – go out into the streets and compel people to come. The ones who are distrustful about the invitation, the ones who rarely know grace, the ones with holes... in their... hearts. Compel them – do what you can to build trust and care to bring them to the table. This is the work to which we are called.

Today is our annual meeting when we reflect on the past year and look forward to what is to come. And you can see the ways we are seeking to do this as congregation.

You'll see it in our giving, supporting Triangle Ministries providing meals and housing for those who would otherwise not have the stability of a home, the Presbytery's efforts toward eliminating medical debt, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Services Dais – you can read about it, but it's a powerful testimony of the ways we are living out God's love.

Our staff is a huge part of the budget, but that's because we believe in living God's love through our community, in worship and gatherings and spurring one another one for ministry – in caring for families with young children because we want to support them especially in a time that is really hard on parents and children, in offering children and youth safe spaces and places of abundant kindness and nurturing that is Christ-centered, in congregational care for some of the most vulnerable – those in crisis, suffering medical issues, aging, lonely, part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Your participation in the life of this congregation makes a difference in the Madison community and beyond. It reflects the ways that we seek to care for others in a variety of circumstances– to send out the invitation to all for God's love, to throw banquets of great diversity, dinners where all are welcome and valued, creating spaces of dignity and beauty, little bits of God's kingdom here on earth as in heaven.