

When Jesus Hosts a Party

By Linda Rex

August 28, 2022, PROPER 17—When I read the gospels, I am amazed at the conversations Jesus had with the people he encountered from all walks of life. And I never realized until a few years ago how many of Jesus' conversations were in some way connected with a meal, either by occurring at a meal or having as its content eating, drinking or gathering for a celebration of some kind.

As we read the gospel passage for this Sunday, Luke 14:1, 7–14, we find that Jesus was once again participating in a social event, where leaders of the community were gathering for a meal. Interestingly enough, when Jesus first entered the home of the host, he saw a man afflicted with edema or severe swelling. He asked the Pharisees and lawyers if it was okay to heal a man on the Sabbath day. They didn't answer his question, but he gave his own response by healing the man, and then reminding them that they would rescue a child or one of their animals on the Sabbath. They really could not come up with an adequate reply to this.

As others entered the room, they began to fuss over who had the seats of honor at the table. Jesus pointed out that it would be better if they showed some humility by taking a lesser seat at first, allowing themselves to be honored by the host choosing to move them into a better position, rather than ending up being ashamed by having to take a lesser seat because they presumed to be somewhere they didn't belong. Jesus didn't mean that one pretended humility in order to gain the praise and approval of others, but rather that one simply took the position of servanthood and service, letting others go first or have the best places rather than seeking them for oneself.

Then Jesus turned to the host and told him that whenever he invited people over, he needed to also invite people who could not return the favor—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Perhaps this was a hint that the man who had been healed ought to have been invited to the meal along with everyone else. Jesus emphasized that the reward for blessing others in this way who could not respond in kind would be eternal blessings in the resurrection. So, the humility of being willing to take second place was followed up with the humility of welcoming simply out of an act of kindness those who could not repay the favor.

On the surface, we see that Jesus is speaking of the need for exercising humility as well as generous hospitality to the less fortunate. But if we look closer, we can see that Jesus is speaking of these things from his position of being the ultimate host. In fact, Jesus was in the process at that moment, as he had been for some time, of welcoming many people of all walks of life to a divine banquet where the only appropriate way to respond to the invitation was through humility and a genuine recognition and admission of one's need to be cared for and fed. As Robert Capon wrote in *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, “The world has been summoned precisely to a party—to a reconciled and reconciling dinner *chez* the Lamb of God; judgment is pronounced only in the light of the acceptance or declination of that invitation” (p. 457).

Who does Jesus invite to the heavenly banquet? Does he only invite the spiritual and those who have their acts together? If we look at the parable in Luke 14 following this one, we will find that he was inviting those who knew the scriptures, who knew God's ways—the leaders of his people—but they didn't want anything to do with him. He was also inviting every person from every walk of life—from the byways, out in the country, and on the streets of the city. Jesus, in his life, death, resurrection and ascension, has included each and every human being in his invitation to the heavenly banquet of eternal life with the Father in the Spirit.

Just as the best approach to being seated at the banquet was to take the lowest seat, Jesus reminds each of us to take the lowest seat with regards to our invitation to the heavenly banquet. The only seat any of us qualify for in regards to that banquet is the seat of death—we all must die and face our judgment in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who went down into death for us, to raise us up with him to the Father's side—our life is hidden with Christ in God. Jesus takes us from the lowest seat of death into a seat with him in the heavenly places (Capon, p. 279). The only response we can give in return that is appropriate is gratitude and praise, and a sense of humility with regards to all of the others in our lives—a willingness to include each and every one of them in what God has so graciously included us.

Jesus is the ultimate host. He invites everyone—prisoners, addicts, and every type of sinner imaginable—the lowest of the low, the sickest of the sick—to his table, to partake with him of the gift of eternal life in loving relationship with the Father in the Spirit. His only requirement is that we die, in him, acknowledging in humility our sincere need for and gratitude for including us in his blessed event. If we insist that a person be of a certain rank or worthiness before they can attend too, then we are missing the whole point of the invitation. We may even find ourselves being escorted to a lower place at the table, so to speak, because we have presumed that our worthiness is based at all on our own efforts to do good or be good, or on others' opinions about how holy we are (Capon, 283).

The essence of the kingdom of God is life in loving other-centered relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and one another. This is who we are in Christ—beloved children of the Father who are each included at the table to share in the divine *koinonia*, now and forever. There is a true humility and reverence with which we approach our seat at the table, but there is also a sense of glee and bubbling joy at the wonderful possibilities which await us in the loving embrace of our Triune God, who invites us to celebrate with him the homecoming of all his beloved children.

Dearest Abba, thank you for including us in Jesus' invitation to your heavenly banquet, and allowing us to participate in relationship with you even now by your precious Spirit. Grant us the grace to approach all our relationships with you and others in true humility and welcoming hospitality, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"Treasure family bonds and friendship. Family fondness remains the essence of this kingdom. Treat strangers with equal affection; they could be a messenger of God in disguise! Identify with those who are in prison or suffering abuse for their faith as if you were the one afflicted."
Hebrews 13:1–3, (4–8, 15–16) Mirror Bible

"It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. ... And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, "Give your place to this man," and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' " Luke 14:1, 7–14 NASB