

Message for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C (8/28/2022)
Luke 14:1, 7-14

I love that Jesus receives, and accepts, a dinner invitation from a leader of the Pharisees in our Gospel from Luke today. It's remarkable for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that Jesus hasn't been especially civil toward the Pharisees. In the preceding chapters, he's called them hypocrites and fools, and taught in direct opposition to legal experts of all kinds, building his reputation as a teacher with authority at their expense. So, it's a bit of a surprise that he'd be invited to dine with them. The simplest explanation is that the Pharisees mistrust Jesus, so they're looking for opportunities to scrutinize him. In other words, it's a *keep your friends close and your enemies closer* kind of situation. But, life in relationship, even difficult relationship, is never quite that simple.

We've often mistakenly read the Pharisees as a flat character in the gospel story, interchangeable with Jesus' other nameless adversaries – scribes and lawyers, Sadducees and Herodians. Taken as a whole, these characters have exemplified rigid opposition to Jesus, and so to the reign of God. Thus, we've written them off. But, the biblical narrative itself is more nuanced than that. Consider, for instance, the Pharisee Nicodemus, who approaches Jesus under the cover of night to acknowledge the legitimacy of his ministry and pick his brain.¹ Nicodemus is not wantonly hostile; on the contrary, he's genuinely curious about this mysterious rabbi, despite the threat Jesus poses to the order of things.

Could it be that the Pharisee who receives Jesus in our Gospel from Luke today is similarly curious? Could it be that he and his distinguished guests, although unsettled by Jesus' teaching, are nevertheless drawn to him? One thing is certain: since the scene that

¹ John 3:1-21.

unfolds at the sabbath meal is charged with both tension and possibility, the company is bound to witness something memorable.

I'm just as fascinated, however, by the fact that Jesus accepts this particular invitation at all. Everyone has to eat, of course, and on account of his itinerant ministry, Jesus so often relies on the hospitality of others. Still, why would he go out of his way to share a meal with rivals? Wouldn't he rather retreat to a table surrounded by supporters so that he might be refreshed for another round of public debate? Jesus' presence at a dinner party with powerful people is already an exercise in breaking down barriers.

This observation leads me to read this story from a different perspective. Because of its setting at a meal in the home of a religious leader, we've often interpreted Jesus' teaching primarily as a caution to people who enjoy relatively high status, those for whom the dynamics of social transaction work fairly well: *When you're invited to a meal, wait to be called up to your proper place so that you may avoid embarrassment. When you host a meal, don't invite your peers so that you may receive a return invitation, but instead invite the poor and the outcast.*

Of course, this teaching has important implications for people with some privilege. According to Jesus, the faithful are not to play by the rules of "calculated reciprocity," hobnobbing with the haves in order to get ahead while turning our backs on the have-nots. Instead, we are to "pursue the ministry of the Gospel with loving humility,"² to quote one interpreter, that is, with the recognition that worldly signs of status are insignificant in the realm of God, where dignity is conferred on rich and poor alike, and where resources, material and social, are widely shared.

² Carolyn J. Sharp, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-luke-141-7-14-5.

But, notice that this interpretation assumes that Jesus' listeners are in a position to send and receive invitations in the first place. I wonder what his teaching means, however, to those who've never been able to count on an invitation, those who dwell forever on the margins. I wonder what this story sounds like to the "lessers" in any social context, the designated outsiders who make the insider category possible. After all, when Jesus arrives at the Pharisee's house for dinner that evening, he represents the marginal and the excluded; Jesus is the unlikely guest, the one who is out of place.

In her mid-20th-century memoir *Nisei Daughter*, Monica Sone tells the story of her childhood as a first-generation Japanese-American citizen living in Seattle's Skid Row neighborhood. Navigating both Japanese and American cultural environments, she watched closely as her father and mother labored to make a life for their family in a land that remained foreign to them in some ways.

On one occasion, her mother reluctantly agreed to join two of her children at a Mickey Mouse Club event at the Coliseum Theater. Arriving separately, she was mistaken by a member of the reception committee as the wife of a Japanese dignitary. And, on account of the language barrier, neither of them was able to clear up the confusion. "[You *are*] the Japanese consul's wife, aren't you?" the woman asked. "Mother didn't know what she meant," Sone explains, "but she knew very well she should be agreeable at all times. [So] she said, 'Yes, thank you,'" at which point she was whisked away to a separate room where other distinguished guests were conversing politely over coffee and delicacies.

It was only when she returned home and asked her husband what "consul's wife" meant that Sone's mother realized the mistake, clapping her hand to her mouth, both amused and horrified by her faux pas. The family wondered what had become of the

actual Japanese consul's wife that day, whether she'd been miffed at the lack of deference shown to her by the event organizers: "She probably would have resented such shabby treatment and reported it to her husband..." They even entertained the possibility that this misunderstanding may have single-handedly soured diplomatic relations between the United States and Japan.³

For as playful as Sone's storytelling is at times, it's also informed by the tragedy of the Second World War when people of Japanese ancestry, citizens or not, were forcibly removed to concentration camps by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. Of course, Monica Sone and her family were among them. And in the end, that's the backdrop behind the story of the Mickey Mouse Club event at the Coliseum Theater. That Sone's mother was once inadvertently included in a circle of insiders didn't change the enduring fact that she was a cultural and political outsider.

In light of such a painful example, what is the promise of Jesus' message today? Especially in Luke, meal fellowship is a powerful metaphor for the reign of God, which "establishes its own social and spiritual order," to borrow the words of another interpreter,⁴ an order that refuses to mimic the order of the world as it is. On the contrary, the second-class citizen is the honored guest at the great and promised feast, where the Lord, once the perpetual guest himself, becomes the eternally gracious and inclusive Host. And at that meal, we are all seated according to his good pleasure,⁵ and not according to our deserving in the world's eyes.

So, come one and all, friends, to a foretaste of the feast to come. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good.

³ See pp.52-9.

⁴ Emilie M. Townes, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 22.

⁵ Rodney S. Sadler, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 25.