

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sunday September 1, 2019 Proper 17C
Text: Luke 14: 1, 7-14
Theme: Strangers become friends
Preacher: Fr. Christopher McLaren

The point of the Gospels is to wake us up to the kingdom of God. The problem is that we operate in predictable and respectable ways that we have been socialized into. Jesus is a welcome guest but an unexpected one as he is always trying to get us to actually see ourselves, to become reflective and therefore open to a different way of being.

Jesus is invited to a party of a prominent religious leader. Jesus is there to be watched in the hopes that he will make a mistake in public. The dinner is a kind ugly hospitality that is really a trap.

But Jesus brings his own surprising game to the table fellowship. As Jesus is being watched, he also watches. He notices the intensity of people selecting the places of honor. In typical comic prophetic fashion Jesus gives the guests some outrageous advice.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus clearly understands the honor and shame code that surrounded the guests. He posits a believable scenario that gets everyone's attention. It is possible that one could over-reach in seeking honor and be asked to sit down lower in the hierarchy of status at the table. This would be a kind of public shaming that all at the party would want to avoid. But perhaps one could take a very different and clever approach to gain more honor by intentionally selecting a seat that is beneath them only to have the host come to them and move them up to a higher place in front of everyone proving their elevated

status. Jesus seems to be teaching them a new strategy of their own status seeking game. Is Jesus actually better at the status seeking game?

Jesus' general approach is not to comply with cultural assumptions but to challenge them. He often does so with outlandish stories and thought teasing examples such as this. Instead of giving the party-goers more deft maneuvers about how to seek honor, Jesus is actually challenging their jockeying for position. He is bringing their internal motivations into the light by advocating an outlandish strategy to gain even more honor. His advice makes sense but only in a crazy honor-hungry way. It promotes the exact opposite of what everyone at the party was trying to do, grasping for the higher seats. The story teases everyone's minds into active thought. Am I really that competitive around the table?

If for a minute they entertain Jesus' idea of seeking the lower places, it only serves his point that they are so manically focused on status and will do anything to get more of it. At that point Jesus could yell out "Gotcha!" If in considering Jesus' off-the-wall suggestion for even a moment, they begin to see the true hilarity of their raw ambitions and the pathetic nature of their maneuvering for a particular place they may begin to laugh at themselves and the whole pathetic culture of social climbing. Laughing at ourselves is the often the beginning of change. The minute we begin to take ourselves less seriously we begin a journey into spiritual growth.

As one commentator suggests the wild story of Jesus could be extended even more. The scheming guest finds the lowest place. The host, upon seeing the honor-hungry guest seated at the lowest place awaiting a higher calling, bends over and whispers into the guest's ear. "I see you know your place." Nothing awakens self-knowledge so sharply as a failed strategy for exaltation. (Shea).

Or perhaps the story could go another way. The scheming guest is ignored by the host and forced to party with the lesser guests. He lets go of his social ambitions and enjoys himself. At the next party, he takes the lowest place because of the company that he enjoys. The host appears, asking him to move up higher but he declines because he is having too good of a time. (Shea).

Outrageous strategies are meant to have outrageous outcomes They may even become a pathway to inner change and new vitality.

As if all of this challenging conversation were not enough, Jesus has yet more challenging and outrageous advice to offer. They will think twice about inviting Jesus to dinner next time but will have to admit that dinner parties with Jesus are not dull.

Turning to the one who had invited him Jesus says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 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, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Once again Jesus has a shocking suggestion. On the surface it looks like exactly the wrong move but that is ultimately the right move from a heavenly perspective. People don't want to invite this group of outcasts to their cozy dinner. They want their friends, people who are like them, people who can repay them with favors, people who may be able to help them rise in the world. But Jesus counsels to invite people who cannot repay you because in the end God repays these acts of wild kindness. So, Jesus causes the host to think more deeply about his guest list and his social arrangements that drive nearly everything he does. If he listens to Jesus, he will have to consider relative merits of hobnobbing with his wealthy friends and relatives this side of death and that of God's repayment for inviting the most vulnerable to dinner at the end of time. What a dilemma!

It is another one of those shocking stories from a prophetic rabbi. Jesus can really be more than a little troublesome. Jesus' crazy stories may remind you of the writing of Flannery O' Connor, the catholic Southern short-story writer and novelist. She was once asked why her characters were so grotesque. She responded that you had to paint large, grotesque figures for the blind to see. Behind this imaginative remark was the firm conviction that people were blind to the assumptive worlds that drove them. She fashioned grotesque characters and violent plots to wake us up to who we were, and what we are concerned about. Her stories shock but they also reveal. Like Jesus she was a prophetic comic.

The parable of the guest-list makes us think about what radical hospitality really looks like and who is actually invited to our tables. Yes, the tables of our homes but also the table of the Eucharist. We know in our heart that everyone is welcome at this table and that the less we put barriers in front of it the more we are like the loving and gracious God we desire to know and befriend. I want to talk a little bit about what it means to have a table that is radially welcoming.

In the gospel of John Jesus says something very powerful about those who want to live in obedience to his love. He says:

This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father.

I've always found the lay down one's life to be rather difficult language to get my head and heart around but I can understand the idea of living as a friend to others. How can we understand an expanding table of fellowship and welcome as part of our call to live as friends to one another?

I've been reading a really good book entitled *The Art of Transformation* by Paul Fromberg the rector of St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in the Bay Area. He has a lot to say about the power of gospel friendship in our lives and in our faith community. **Gospel friendship is meant to animate our congregation.**

"Although living in friendship is pretty straightforward, it is sometimes complicated in our life, as it is in the congregation. Friendship means demands and accommodation; it means gentleness and toughness. When it veers toward toughness, friendship isn't always pretty. (*The Art of Transformation* p. 58.).

I love what Paul has to say about gospel friendship:

Being a friend is messy and dangerous, along with being gorgeous and exhilarating. Gospel friendship is based on love, the kind of love that creates a permanent wound in your soul that is the source of both pain and life. It is more than a theoretical position; it's more than a top-ten list of do's and don'ts, Gospel friendship means surrendering a part of my will, a part of my desperate addiction to control, to another person. Gospel friendship means that my story and my future are not all about me, they're as much about the people I bind myself to in the community of faith. (*The Art of Transformation* p. 59).

The church is a wild and open place and that means that anyone who presents themselves at the doors can become a part. Not everyone who shows up is the most loveable sort of person but that does not negate the call that each of us has to befriend them. Gospel friendship means seeing Christ in unlikely places and people

and trusting that in choosing to love someone that might be difficult for me or repel me is actually the way to discovering more of God's love myself.

Gospel friendship makes you vulnerable; it means opening yourself to the other person. Gospel friendship opens you to the truth of yourself; it is in serving another, and loving that person, that your life increases. That's what it means to lay down your life for your friend. It means opening yourself to the love – and the pain – of being in relationship to another. It means gaining new life, by giving away our lives. It means being transformed by our willingness to live in friendship. (The Art of Transformation p. 61).

I think that this challenging thing called gospel-friendship is what Jesus was trying to get at in his parable of the guest-list. He was trying to get us to think about love's demands within the table-fellowship of the church and to encourage us and challenge us to see the table within the congregation as a place of radical welcome to all who come through our doors not just for some who we already know.

Living in gospel friendship is a choice that congregations have to make. If St. Mark's wants to be a truly welcoming congregation then we have to strive to welcome the strangers who arrive at our doors as if they are insiders already. Becoming intentional about welcoming each new person deepens our experience of gospel friendship.

Jesus' challenging story about who to invite to dinner becomes something that not only awakens us but also pushes us to pay attention to those whom we are likely to miss while we are busy talking to our friends and hiding out at church. Here at St. Mark's we want to strive to see God's image in those we do not already know, the stranger and the seeker who come to us. Offering strangers a preferential welcome, as if they were invited and are expected opens us to the knowing more of God in new ways.

In some ways what I'm saying is something many of you accept and say yes, I get it, we're a welcoming church. Many of you received a warm welcome and stayed because of the quality of the fellowship and warmth. But on the other hand, what I'm saying tends to fall on deaf ears. Do we really understand that one of our primary jobs each Sunday is to welcome people who we do not know into the loving fellowship of Christ in this place? Are we really willing to spend our time at coffee hour seeking out the newcomer instead of just talking with our friends? Can we leave our church business until during the week so that we have time and space on

Sunday morning to talk with someone new? Do we notice newcomers in worship and help them to participate in the liturgy as much as they would like?

Over and over again Jesus is pictured as a stranger in the gospel stories. Even when he comes to his hometown, the people don't know him at all and he is rejected. He appears as a stranger to many of those he meets along the way. For this reason, we are called and invited to see God's image in those we do not already know; in the strangers who come through our doors each week. Receiving strangers is the key to growth and vitality in our own lives and in the life of the church. In welcoming the stranger, we share what is distinctive about our own faith community here at St. Mark's and listen to the new thing that they are bringing us. Though it is challenging, the practice of welcoming and receiving strangers creates an openness to learning more about the ways that God is at work not only in their lives but within our own. It is a way of being awake to the new thing that God's Spirit is doing right here and right now. (Fromberg).

So, when you celebrate the Holy Eucharist, invite not only your friends and relatives and neighbors, but think of yourselves as inviting everyone who walks through these doors, and welcome them to this place and into friendship with God because that changes everything. For in welcoming stranger we welcome Christ.

Blessed be God the Word, who came to his own and his own received him not – for in this way God glorifies the stranger. O God, show us your image in all who come to us today, that we may welcome them and you.

*Note: I am deeply indebted to John Shea's commentary on this passage and his analysis of Jesus as a comic prophet awakening us to our own assumptions. I am also deeply indebted to Paul Fromberg and his excellent book entitled *The Art of Transformation: Three things churches do that change everything*. I have quoted several sections of his chapter on Friendship in this sermon.*