

Whom Will You Invite?
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Luke 14:1, 7-14

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I want to **piggy back a bit on Charles' sermon** from last week as he reminded us that when we come to worship, we basically hope to leave feeling good about ourselves and who we are, but truth be known, we really should be scared out of our wits—for true worship could possibly unsettle the very world in which we are comfortable. True worship could possibly loosen in us a spirit to do unusual things that might even be out of character for us. If you were here last week, then you will just have to realize that one of the hazards of being a frequent attender is that sometimes when we are minding our own business, listening to the assigned scripture lesson being read it dares to jump us from behind, mock us, ridicule us, deride us, make us look like fools—when all we really want to do is look religious. No wonder not many people attend worship on a regular basis! Who wants to be abused!!?!

Those of you who know Jesus and the way God works knows that Jesus often did this, particularly with serious, knowledgeable people—people like us. Here, Jesus has been invited to a dinner after the synagogue service. The person doing the inviting was a quite prominent person; in fact scripture tells us he was the leader of the Pharisees. Now some of you might think **Jesus didn't like the Pharisees**, but the truth is actually quite the opposite—it **wasn't so much that Jesus didn't like the Pharisees, but that he wanted them**

to understand the truth—not so much the letter of the law, but the ways of understanding of what was truly important. They were the religious leaders of the day, after all. Many of **Jesus’** teachings were brought on by the **questions of the Pharisees, in a “we’ve got him now” kind of attitude—but Jesus’ response was one of teaching, of trying to help them and us see what really matters.** So, here we have it—Jesus being invited to lunch after **worship and then we are told that “they were watching him closely”.** Now **Jesus hadn’t been in this man’s home for two minutes before he launches** into an attack on his fellow guests for the way they jockey for the best seats at the table. Then **Jesus tells them a parable. It’s not a parable in the sense of many of the parables that Jesus has used—the sower, the Good Samaritan and so on, but more a parable that should be a “rule of thumb” so to speak.** Jesus then begins to hammer his host for the nature of his guest list. I expect **Jesus’ dinner invitations got fewer and fewer after this evening.**

Yep, here we gather with our robes and our dignity, and finery in our beautiful building – and here is Jesus attacking important people, mocking folk at the top, and glorifying the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame, that is, people who are in short supply around here on Sundays. Is Jesus trying to make us clergy and musicians look bad?

As I read this passage I was reminded of when I first came here and how many of you so kindly invited me to dinner or to lunch, which was wonderful. I remember also that although I always try to be true to whom I am, I also wanted to make a good impression and not offend you or anyone else whom you might have invited. **Therefore, I’m sure that I weighed my words with you carefully.** After all, I wanted you to like me and to be glad that I was one of your new pastors. Now Jesus, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. Here he is, I would imagine, for the very first time in this **Pharisee’s house, and what does he do? He slams both the host and the guests.** Jesus is different, thank goodness.

Maybe we forget that. That Jesus is different and his expectations are different. We think of church as time when we come to get close to Jesus, to **touch base with what we've always believed, to reassure ourselves that we've** got this thing right. But then comes Jesus in with all of his prickly difference. How different are the ways of Jesus from our ways? What a great gap between his system of values and ours. Those whom we fight to sit next to at dinner, Jesus has no use for. Those whom we exclude from our economy, our educational mechanisms, our systems of health care, and even our church – Jesus invites to a great banquet where the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame sit at the head of the table for free.

Now perhaps I want to let my own self off the hook a bit here, but I **don't think we intentionally exclude those who "aren't like us." I think part** of it is simply the way we have been taught. I am reminded of when my son was in the fourth grade. He had been in this wonderful school since he was in the second grade—he was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to a very good private school in the area. Everything was wonderful and then he entered the fourth grade and the headmaster that had been there retired and a new one took his place. I went to the meeting at the beginning of the year when this headmistress was introduced and all of her academic achievements and fundraising miracles were touted and everyone appropriately applauded. This attractive, well dressed lady stood up and began to talk about her goals and dreams for the school. One of her goals was to get more children enrolled she said—and then she **said** “we certainly want our children to be **around others like us.” The “like us” is what rubbed me the wrong way, but** I kept my mouth shut. Now this school was 99 percent Caucasian children from fairly wealthy families. Had it not been for my coaching the softball **team, I don't think I would have ever felt too comfortable there**—as I pulled up in my Honda Accord in a line of BMWs, Mercedes, etc.—now I know it **doesn't matter**—but you know—you always want your children to feel like

they belong. My question **all that evening was “but do I want my child to only be around children “like us” (because obviously we weren’t quite “like us).” It bothered me so much that I made an appointment with the** headmistress the next day and went in to talk to her about it, hoping she **would clear up any confusion and put my mind at ease that she didn’t really** mean it the way it sounded. She certainly began to back pedal some when the subject was broached, but never quite back downed from wanting others **“like us.” I think it was** the fundraising she was concerned about.

Regardless, I wonder what Jesus would have said to that? I also wondered how these children, including mine, would learn what it means to accept people for who they are and to live, work and play with all kinds of people, **not just the ones “like us.” But if all we ever know are “people like us” and** we are never challenged to go outside of our comfort zones—what could Jesus expect, I mean really.

We also must be on guard, we must guard ourselves from offering tokens of hospitality or tokens of acceptance—we must be genuine in our invitations and our relationships. We should **never try to “fix” someone else or “fix” another culture. When Jesus turned this host’s world upside down** by saying invite the guests you would never invite, did he really understand **what he was asking. To invite someone to dinner that is not “like us” is a bit** of a challenge. It involves sitting down at the table with them—it involves sharing a meal, a conversation—getting to know someone. **It’s different than** serving at a soup kitchen or taking sandwiches out to the homeless which **most of us have done, it’s inviting someone into your church, your home,** your life and sharing together around the table.

It’s easy to invite people “like us” to dine, but what about those not “like us?” Then it gets a bit more difficult, doesn’t it, a bit more uncomfortable.

We've all been to events where we've watched people jockeying for position and scrambling for seats of honor or to stand by someone important or to be seen with someone important—maybe some of us are those **important people that others want to be seen with, who knows. And we've** all had our quiet laugh as we have observed this. First it is funny, as we realize how insecure these people must be and then a bit sad that folks are that insecure with themselves. We laugh, of course, until we realize that we are just as insecure, only we have sense enough to hide it. Jesus is not recommending that we remain the proud undercover. He is not recommending that we pretend hospitality and humility, but that we be truly **humble and accepting. That means that we see everyone's self worth in the light of God's estimation. It matters not to God what our social or economic** status might be. All of **God's children are worthwhile and that is so because** of God, not because of us. We cannot earn our worth before God. It is given. We can reject it, neglect it, tarnish it, try to trash it, but we cannot lose it. The Pharisees overestimated their worth, thinking it had something to do with themselves and their self righteousness, something to do with their hard work or their education. They also thereby underestimated the worth of the poor, the disabled, the outcast and even the sinner. They would never think of having such folks for dinner or associate with them in any way whatsoever. After all, they were not their **"kind" of people**—they were not **"like them."** **The irony was that this Pharisee had invited Jesus for dinner, who was also "not like them"** who at this point in his life, had no home to invite him back!

So there's another thought about hospitality and generosity that is evident in this parable in verse 12. That is we are not to expect anything in return. Real generosity, non-reciprocal generosity, real hospitality, non-reciprocal hospitality does not expect repayment and often does not get repayment (at least not in this life). Being welcoming to those who can repay

us is not really being welcoming. Real hospitality, real generosity says, **“I do for you because you are a child of God.” I do for you because God has given me everything I have and it does not belong to me to start with.**” People who overestimate their own worth underestimate the worth of all others.

I took a youth group to Washington, D.C. one summer to work at the Church of the Pilgrimage. They worked in the D.C. Kitchen alongside of homeless people being trained to work as chefs. They served meals in the parks and along the streets of some of the not so nice areas in D.C. All of this was very meaningful—as some of these youth had never left the mountains of North Carolina—They saw people of many different races and interacted with people of all economic backgrounds. While all of it was educational and had an impact on all who went I think the thing that hit home for many of them and definitely for me were the evenings that we had invited homeless people to come in and have a meal with us and share their stories. One particular woman came in to share her story—she was a college graduate and had been working for a large company in D.C. She had been living on the street for two years—sometimes staying in homeless shelters (but preferred not to, because they were actually less safe than the streets). She got her meals as best she could and was trying to find a job. She had lost her job because of a bout with mental illness. I could tell you her whole **story, but you have heard many of them I’m sure. The thing that hit home** for all of us there was this: One of the youth **asked her “What can we do to make things better for homeless people.” She smiled and looked at this fair** skinned, red haired sixth grader—then she looked around at all of us and **tears began to run down her face. She said, “Child, you cannot fix a broken** system—but you can do one thing. Look us in the eye. When you see us on **the street, say hello and look us in the eye. That,” she said, “gives us back** our dignity and helps us remember that we are no better or worse than anyone else. We are human beings, **we are children of God.”**

This parable that we have heard today—the simple way I have tried to make us all understand it, without making us all too uncomfortable is **probably not what Jesus would do. Jesus would probably say: “Get over yourselves and open those doors to all who are as different from you as night and day.” Jesus would say this because Jesus came to turn the world upside down—to make our lives topsy-turvy. It is a tall order to follow, it is a difficult bill to fill, but it is what Jesus would do. We find ourselves reading in the Parable what kind of people God wants in the kingdom. Jesus first went to the religious, to the people you’d think were wanting to dine at the banquet table of God, and yet they basically ignored his message. It’s not that Jesus didn’t want the religious and the elite—it’s just that they wouldn’t listen. Jesus wants all at his table, but do we? Do we really? I wonder if someone had walked in and asked me if he or she could share their homeless story with the congregation this morning, if I would have given the pulpit over to them. Or would I have said “we need to schedule that in and you will need to take a bath and wear a suit and you only get two minutes.”** I wonder. While there is nothing wrong with decently and in order and there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting good things for you and for your children and grandchildren –do we do so at the exclusion of others? Teenagers and soon to be college students or current college students—what do you do when the misfit or oddball wants to talk with you or sit with you at lunch? What about the party that you throw or the cookout at your house—who will you invite—only those popular kids, only those who will help you out later on? What about the awkward kid, **the one that doesn’t quite fit in?** What parties will he or she be invited to?

Who is at Jesus’ table in this parable? It doesn’t mean you can’t be there too, Jesus wants us all there—Jesus just wants us to invite him and others that aren’t “like us.”

I don't like these kind of sermons—I like to give sermons that make you feel good about who you are that remind you of how much God loves you, because God does. I like for you to know that no matter how we fail, God still loves us—**but we can't not** hear this story. This is what the banquet of God, **God's** kingdom, looks like—foreigners, strangers, illegal aliens, poor, homeless, blind, lame, strangers out on the highway (though there will undoubtedly be popular and influential there as well). It is made up of common, everyday people like you and me, it also consists of the outcasts and rejects of society. Let me end this sermon with just a few questions and suggestions as we begin a new church year and school year together—

- How much are we trying to be like Jesus in the people we befriend and interact with?
- How much does our social group or our friend group or our church look like the kingdom of heaven?
- **How is it like God's banquet?**
- Young people and even adults—think about people that may not be popular or “cool”—**those people that don't get invited to parties, or** out after the ball games, those people that eat by themselves. Think of people you may not have ever considered spending time with. How can you reach out and be Christ to them?
- Think about people you invite to church. Have you tried inviting **someone that might not be “like us” Why or why not?**
- **And church if someone shows up that is not “like us” then** what? How welcoming are we?
- **How can you live out Jesus' message from this story.**
- *And finally even if you aren't comfortable inviting someone off the street to dine at your table or even come to church with you:*
 - Be kind to them

- Show them dignity and respect
- Look them in the eye and say hello.
- Care for people
- Realize that God cares about and loves everyone—even those **people we don't. It is difficult to follow Christ's example, but we** can certainly try.