

Proper 17C 2019 SSP

St. Luke 14:1(2-6), 7-14

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In today's Gospel from Saint Luke, Jesus is the guest of a Pharisee ruler at a dinner on the Sabbath. The very words Pharisee ruler and Sabbath should alert us to trouble coming. But we don't know the half of it.

It starts with Luke saying that Jesus's hosts were watching him closely, and it then proceeds to Jesus's remarks on the table etiquette, how the guests were choosing for themselves the best places. But we have skipped over something because of the Church Lectionary, and in order to understand what follows we need to see what we missed by skipping.

Here it is. After Luke notes that Jesus's hosts were watching him closely, he tells us that a man swollen with dropsy, presumably an uninvited guest, presented himself to Jesus, who asked his hosts if they thought it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. They were silent, so Jesus took the man's hand, healed him, and released him, noting how exceptions were made to help children and animals; and the hosts were speechless. Then Jesus proceeded with his observations about how people were seating themselves at the table.

So what we have today is even more extraordinary than it reads, especially when you realize what has been skipped. Jesus, knowing he was being scrutinized, began things with a thunderclap, a miracle. From what follows, we see that things have changed, and it is now not that his hosts are scrutinizing Jesus; he is scrutinizing his hosts. In fact, he has taken over the dinner party. Jesus has known his hosts' hostility from the moment of their invitation; and now, in the wake of a healing miracle on the Sabbath in the Pharisee's house, Jesus turns to the attack.

Jesus begins with what seems to be practical advice about seating arrangements. When you're a dinner guest at events such as this one, it is prudent not to claim for yourself a prime seat. A more eminent guest may come later – as they often do – and you may be asked to give place to the eminence. So in order to avoid embarrassment, pick out the lowest place for yourself, and wait and see. The host may say to you, Friend! Come up higher! And you will enjoy the respect. There is practical advice like this to be found in the book of Proverbs.

But this isn't where Jesus is going. He is not interested in the "right way to get exalted." In fact, as we know from innumerable passages in the prophets, God will do all the humbling and all the exalting. So what Jesus is touching on here, when he speaks of humbling and exalting, is the same as when he speaks of repentance. Humility, and repentance, like all the graces, are entire frames of mind that express themselves as we go along in specific circumstances. Basically, those who forget about themselves and look to goodness for others are those whom God will exalt in the end; and it will be a gracious surprise, because they weren't thinking about self-exaltation at all.

Now on to the destination. Having commented on table etiquette among his hosts, Jesus says that when they give a dinner party, they should invite those who cannot reciprocate: the poor, the lame, the blind. Dinner parties, when they proceed from the frame of mind of humility and generosity, are like that. They are not given with an eye to repayment or reward. If there is a reward, it will be at the Resurrection, when like in the story of the sheep and the goats, the Lord will say to the surprised sheep that when he was hungry or thirsty, or in prison or sick, or needy in some way, they ministered to him. How? By doing it to "the least of these," said the Lord, you have done it to me.

At this point, we do need to say that the Lord frequently enjoyed meals and receptions with friends. Such things are good. They are done as a joy in themselves. The Last Supper itself could fall into that category.

The point is not credit-seeking. It is not credit-seeking in the form of building up IOU's among people we want to impress. And it is not credit-seeking in piling up merits that will be cashed in on the Last Day as a heavenly reward. The point is to walk with God and to be rewarded in that very walk. Any "reward" will be made clear in the end, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.

Our story today began with the Pharisees inviting Jesus to a Sabbath Day dinner party in order to monitor and trap him. But Jesus, beginning with a healing miracle for an uninvited guest and continuing with teaching about the purpose of the Sabbath and hospitality in general, did not just turn the tables. He overturned them, as he did the tables of the money changers in the temple court. He took over.

One final thing. We mentioned the Last Supper as a gathering of Jesus with his friends. Jesus, on that occasion, said we are his friends, if we do what he commands us. And what is that? "A New Commandment I give you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. By this people will know you are my disciples." Now a lot has happened since that Last Supper. It was Jesus's last supper but also his first Eucharist with us. Week by week, even day by day, around the world, Jesus gives his own reception and meal. As his servants, let us try to be as welcoming as the host.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.