

Sermon – Luke 14:1, 7-14
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
12 Pentecost – Year C
28 August 2022

“A Seating Chart for God’s Kingdom”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I wasn’t out of the Uber for more than ninety second before I realized what I’d forgotten. Stepping out of the car in the drizzling rain, I remembered to grab my garment bag, phone, prayer book, and umbrella. But standing in the atrium of the Greek Orthodox church, I realized that I’d left my keys on the backseat of the car, whose driver had by that point already sped off into the city to pick up another rider. It’s a bit of a helpless feeling, knowing that your keys are riding through the city in someone else’s car. It didn’t prevent me from enjoying the wedding at which I was assisting or the reception that followed, but I knew I was going to spend the next few days locked out, dependent upon others for access to my home, office, and car.
2. I doubt Jesus arrived for dinner at the Pharisee’s house via Uber, but once there he begins to talk about those who are locked out, either of the places they’d like to be seated or of the meal altogether. In a parable and subsequent teaching, Jesus digs into our practices of hospitality, given and received. In the former, he speaks to those invited, chastising them for worrying about where they are seated, for caring about the optics of their place at the feast. In the latter, he speaks to those who do the inviting, urging them to not think on how they will be repaid for their hospitality but to instead throw wide the doors to those who are in one way or another unfairly regarded as less than others. Jesus offers a not-so-subtle assault on our constant need to draw

- boundaries around who's in and who's out. Jesus' parables are spoken to those already included at this particular meal; why worry about where you're seated, he asks. And more directly, why haven't you invited those who remain locked outside?
3. There is a clear word of accusation in these parables. We tend to care so much about getting in and fitting in that we often forget about those who have nothing to eat, or no one to eat with. It's tempting to simply say to you today, "do better." And frankly, we all should. I certainly should. As Carolyn Sharp of Yale Divinity School writes, "Jesus' exhortation to host 'the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' constitutes a strong political challenge to the finely calibrated reciprocity governing social interaction under Roman imperialism. Countering oppressive social and economic norms," she continues, "is core to the gospel as Luke presents it." The gospel challenges us every bit as much as it did Rome. We live in a world, a culture, of gross inequality. Surely God calls us to do better.
 4. But there is more going on here, for a parable that is nothing but law is not much at all. We may not think on it much. We may not even care. But we already know this world is divided between those who have seats at the table and those who don't. We already know, if we are willing to honestly reflect for a moment, that we care too much about where we are seated and how we are perceived. Jesus' jab lands easily this morning. But is there grace to be found?
 5. Jesus speaks this parable from a place of honor. He has been invited by this leader of the Pharisees. Jesus has pride of place as a guest. But instead of basking in the glory of being an insider, he locates himself with the outsiders. When Jesus says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," he's not giving advice on how to win friends and influence people. Instead, Jesus is telling us *who* he is and

what he will do. Jesus, this One who was in the beginning with God, this One who is God, does not remain in the heavenly banquet, unconcerned about those who are locked out of heaven's joys through sin and death. As Paul writes to the Philippians, Jesus empties himself, taking on the form of a slave. He does not simply care for the infirm; he bears our infirmities. He doesn't simply name our sin; he becomes sin so that in his death sin would be put to death. Jesus humbles himself all the way unto death on a cross. For his willing self-giving and sacrifice, his Father exalts him. Jesus doesn't win many friends along the way. He dies nearly alone. But he lives again that no one needs to be alone, outside, ever again. Jesus puts to death our small ideas of who belongs and opens up a Kingdom with room enough for all.

6. In speaking about how to be a better guest and a better host, Jesus isn't being a very good guest. He seems to have misplaced his manners, attacking the host who invited him by declaring that others should have been invited, too. He gives advice we're not keen to hear: Invite the last people you'd want to invite. But as the preacher (and daughter of our organist today) Miriam Schmidt writes, "*Although Jesus is not a good guest, we pray again and again: Come, Lord Jesus be our guest. We ask Jesus, with his bad manners, to be our guest over spaghetti or hot dogs or salad. And why?*" Pastor Schmidt continues: "If Jesus would be our guest, then we could step down from all our failed attempts to do the right thing, to hold it all together, or to save our little corner of the world. We could step down, because when Jesus joins us at table, he becomes the host." Yes. The grace of God overfills our mailboxes with repeated invitations: No matter what label the world would give you; no matter how many times you've been locked out; no matter how often you've failed to include others; no matter anything at all, for the sake of Jesus Christ, you've invited. Included. Embraced. Alive.
7. As those invited, the call upon us is clear. Invite others. For this purpose, Jesus entrusts his bride, the church, with the Office of the Keys. We are

- commissioned to go forth, not just with better intentions, but with the power and love of Christ himself. We are given his power to forgive sins, to cut through divisions, to knock down doors, to build bigger tables. We likely won't get any better at it on our own, but we are not on our own. We act on behalf of Christ, and Christ will bear neither division nor exclusion for long
8. In the end, once the party gets going in all its raucous fullness, we'll wonder what all the worry was about. Even without keys in my pocket, Erika and I arrived at the reception and found our names printed beautifully on cards with a table assignment. It was good to know where we were seated – after all, that's where our food would be delivered – but beyond that what did it matter. We were at the wedding banquet, and that's what mattered. Soon enough we'd all be on the dance floor, anyway, lost in the joy God's new future unfolding before our eyes. So will it be in the Kingdom of God. First or last, who cares? The joy is to be there, and the joyous task is to invite others in. Your name has been permanently engraved on the guest list. In the unshakeable promise of the invitation, we can set more places at our tables even now, seeing in every meal, every party, an opportunity to share a foretaste of the banquet that will come. We can unlock doors for one another, just as Tyler, my Uber driver, did for me by mailing back my keys. The stone is rolled away. The doors of the Kingdom have been thrown open. Why would we try to close them again? Come on in, grab any seat you can find, and leave the door open behind you. Feast today upon the love of Christ, a love that you can't help but share with others. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.