

## **Guest and Host**

**Luke 14: 1, 7-14**

**August 31, 2025, Home Moravian Church**

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is always eating with someone. Often, he's eating with someone the Pharisees consider undesirable: tax collectors and sinners. Just as often, though, he's eating with the Pharisees! And as closely as the Pharisees observe him when he's entering or exiting the house of a tax collector, their scrutiny is even closer when he dines in one of their homes. During a dinner in chapter 7, he shocks his Pharisee host by letting an uninvited female wash his feet; during another, in chapter 11, he shocks his Pharisee host by not washing his hands according to ritual. If it were me, I think I'd want to wash my hands of the whole thing.

But each time the Pharisees challenge Jesus, he uses their challenge as occasion for teaching. The Pharisees seem always surprised to realize that as they've been observing Jesus, he's been observing them, too. As our text says today: He *noticed*.

Luke's Pharisees observe Jesus because they are scholars. They're curious. They invite Jesus to dine because the dinner table is the place for a good discussion, even a good argument. They really, truly want to know what Jesus thinks. And then they find out. Which makes me think that when we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, our guest to be," we need to be prepared for the consequences of inviting a guest like Jesus.

While at dinner in a Pharisee's home in today's story, Jesus is observant as ever. This time, he notices how the Pharisee's guests angle for the best seats at the table, the places of honor near the host. I'm not sure how many places of honor there are at a dinner like this, but I'm guessing they are fewer than the guests who seek them. I imagine a sort of game of silent

musical chairs as the guests circle the seats. But to Jesus, it's not a game; it's an occasion for teaching.

Picture the guests who managed to snare those places of honor, perhaps by dishonorable means; elbows may have been involved. How do they feel now, sitting in those seats as Jesus lays out his observations?

*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.*

Maybe there's a little embarrassed squirming in those seats of honor, at least at first. But as Jesus goes on, maybe the guests hear a way to avoid this embarrassment next time. *Next time*, they're thinking, *I'll take a seat lower down; then, not only will I get a better seat by invitation, but everyone will see how humble I've been, and how the host wishes to honor me. Jesus said so himself: I'll be "honored in the presence of all"! If I humble myself, I will be exalted. Score!*

Before we accept this interpretation of Jesus' teaching, let's see if we can put ourselves into the mind of one of those guests, and try to figure out why they want to be "exalted" in the

first place. We're familiar by now with the scramble for public acclaim that has infected our society at even the highest levels. Yet many celebrities say that public attention has made a hash of their lives. Who would want it? What's going on with the guest who is always angling for a greater honor; and why might they enjoy imagining how, next time, an even greater show—the glory of being publicly *invited into* a seat of honor? If I'm that guest, what does it mean to me to be made much of?

It means I matter. It means I matter more than *you*. I strive to be acknowledged as important, because I fear that I am not.

By angling for public acknowledgment of my great importance, I'm telling you what keeps me awake at night: the fear that I am not at all important; that I am all wrong, somehow; and that in my terrible wrongness I don't matter, not anywhere, not in any way, not to anyone.

I think you would grieve for this banquet guest. And I'm thinking Jesus grieves for that guest too. Reading this story, I have always heard scolding; but today, I hear pity. This is Luke's Jesus: the same Jesus who promises, in chapter 12, that everything God created *matters*: every sparrow is watched, every raven is fed, every lily is clothed, and God counts every hair on every person's head. I hear this Jesus wanting people to know how much every person matters to God, as a part of God's creation. Knowing we matter to God should humble us, because we didn't do anything to make it happen; it's a gift.

While the guests struggle to understand what Jesus is telling them, what of the host? Remember, he invited Jesus into his home because he wanted to hear what Jesus thought. As he listens to Jesus and watches his guests squirming in their seats, everything is going just as he had hoped. That is, until Jesus turns toward *him*.

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, says Jesus, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters 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.*

Not only has Jesus noticed the guests as they seek recognition; he has noticed the host as he seeks compensation, giving a dinner to get a dinner. This Pharisee, whose guests tonight seek honor at his table, will tomorrow be angling for a seat of honor at someone else's. It's all part of the same social system, which is beginning to sound more like a trap. Can anyone break free?

Jesus says yes, they can, and the key is humility. Humility, in today's text, is lesson one. And since the people in this story don't seem to understand what humility means, he offers lesson two: Learn humility from the humble. Step out of the status-seeking system, and draw close to the marginalized people whose circumstances have kept them from entering that system in the first place. Learn humility through relationship with the humble.

When he brings up the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, Jesus doesn't tell the host to give to a charity that will help them. If the host is seeking status, he might try to use generosity to his own advantage. In chapter 18, Luke's Jesus will talk about a Pharisee who boasts before God about his tithing, seeking status through his prayers by glorifying his own generosity. Spoiler alert: The Pharisee will not come out well in that story, which will end with the same words we heard in today's text: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Also: It's hard to learn humility from a distance. Jesus does not tell the host in today's story to provide for the marginalized while keeping them at arm's length. He tells him to invite the marginalized into his home! To sit at table with the people his society says are not fit for society! Do this, says Jesus, and "you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Wait: *You will be repaid?* Then does Jesus' teaching really offer release from the system that endlessly seeks status and constantly demands compensation? If the guests could find in Jesus' instruction to *humble themselves* a path to status—*I'll be exalted!*—then what promise might the host find in the word "repaid"? Will guest and host walk home satisfied to have learned, *from Jesus*, better ways to game the system? Will we?

Or will all the characters in this story step out of the system, into the far more complex, beautiful, and *humbling* reality of God's creation? God's creation, in which they, and we, have mattered all along? God's creation, in which all of us matter equally because each of us plays a part—from a sparrow to you, with all those hairs on your head? (Or not!) God loves us because we are part of God's creation, and God loves God's creation. As commentator Alan Culpepper has written, "Humility is rooted in the certainty that God has accepted us."<sup>1</sup> The only recognition that matters is in the loving eyes of God.

Jesus' instruction to humble ourselves is not a short cut to status, but an invitation to let status go. An urging to think differently about who matters, and how, and to whom. An encouragement to take the long and challenging path to deeper relationship with God's creation and all the people in it. Do we seek status? Our status is that we are loved because we are part of God's kingdom. Do we seek to be repaid? We will be richly repaid by kingdom relationships.

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), XI.287.

The more deeply we connect with those who society tells us are not part of anything, the more we discover ourselves part of everything. Everything that matters.

Why did Jesus spend so much time noticing? Because it mattered. We matter. Are we ready to hear what he notices about us? Then come, Lord Jesus, our guest to be. Amen.