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Luke 14:1-24 “Dinner as Usual”

One of the gifts of the gospels is that they tell stories about Jesus. These stories inform us, have the power to transform us, and they engage our imagination. Even as Mark was reading the scripture passage I found myself realizing that I was forming an image in my mind about what Luke was describing in this text. Not only was I forming an image but I was having some emotional reactions. There were parts that honestly didn't feel very good to me, places where I felt uncomfortable, experienced anxiety, and then relief when that moment passed. There were times I remembered some of my previous invitations and banquets, and experiences that went well and left joyful memories, and those that left wounds. And even as Mark read the passage again my mind and heart formed an opinion about this text and decided where I fit in it.

Now this text is a very rich text with much depth and multiple characters present and others that are named within the stories. I wonder, if you had to place yourself within the text, which character would you most identify with? I'll list them again for your consideration: Jesus, a prominent Pharisee, a man suffering from abnormal swelling, Pharisees, experts in the law, guests, host of a meal, friends, brothers or sisters, relatives, rich neighbors, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, a servant, those invited, owner of a new field, owner of new yoke of oxen, newly married, a banquet host, those found in the streets and alleys, and those found on the roads and country lanes. Whew. That is a long list of roles in just 24 verses!

Do you see yourself in any of these characters? Are there certain characters that you are sure that you are **not**, and some that you are sure you **are**? Hold onto those reflections for a while.

In today's passage we find Jesus sitting around a table - a pretty familiar image of a mundane, everyday occurrence. Throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus being invited to meals, hosting meals, and sharing in food and fellowship with others. Particularly in Luke's gospel we find Jesus sharing some of these meals at a table with the Pharisees. "If the incarnation teaches us anything, it is that the frequent and familiar are not to be overlooked in defining life in the presence of God."ⁱ

Our twenty-four verses this morning then can actually be divided into four smaller sections that are connected due to that context around a meal. If you return with me to Luke chapter 14 we begin in verse one. You know, we actually start out so well... we might have a nice or cozy feeling... "One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee..." Doesn't that sound nice? It reminds me of going to each other's house for lunch after church. And then the line continues... "he was being carefully watched." Wow, that never feels good! It doesn't matter if you are 7 or 47 or 97. The sense of being carefully watched, with the connotation of watching to see how you will fail or mess up or disappoint, never feels warm and cozy or even safe. So already here in verse 1 we get a glimpse that this might not be "dinner as usual" with Jesus.

Then again, throughout the gospels did we ever experience 'dinner as usual' with Jesus? Remember the one time a woman broke into the meal and started anointing Jesus' feet? Or the times Jesus halted the meal to go and heal someone, or attend to someone's needs? Or the times Jesus sat down at the table with those others told him he had no business sharing food with? Or that one time at the table he picked up the bread and blessed it and broke it? Or the time he is joined by others on the road to Emmaus and decides to share a meal with them? Right, so "dinner as usual" with Jesus usually means that "those mealtime scenes usually ended in drama, (provoking

others), or scandal... Worst of all — (Jesus) said things. Blunt, embarrassing things that no one cared to hear.”ⁱⁱ So, when our passage begins with Jesus at the table we should have learned by now that this means that things are going to be interesting, exciting, engaging, and unexpected things just might happen!

Well, if we approached our passage this morning with that type of attitude we would not be disappointed! Jesus heals someone, on the Sabbath, during a meal. Then he becomes a rude guest. We are told in verse seven that when he sees how guests pick their places to sit he tells them a story to help put them in their place. Basically he tells them “You are doing it all wrong. You care only about yourself.” Then not wanting to leave out critique of the host, in verse twelve Jesus turns to the host and basically tells them that they invited the wrong people. Instead they should have invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. You know, just “dinner as usual” with Jesus around!

Then in verse fifteen we have this random observation from someone at the table with Jesus who says “Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” What?! So either this person really understood what Jesus was about and the message he was trying to communicate... or this person was really good at randomly proclaiming “Sunday School answers.” Now if Jesus thought that this individual had a proper assessment on the situation he could have said “Yes, exactly.” Instead though in verse sixteen we are told that Jesus replied and shared yet another parable.

The parable is this: A man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. Side note, the custom of the time would have normally followed a two invitation structure. Meaning that invitations would have been sent out kind of like a “save a date” card that would have asked for an RSVP, and then a second invitation would have come at the time of the event. So man is

preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. Then when it was ready he sent his servant to tell those who had committed to come, that now everything was ready. But here is when problems started to creep in. As the servant goes to let those know who have accepted the invitation that now it was time to come the servant is met with excuses. Now, another side note. These are actually valid, reasonable, and acceptable excuses. It was not that these guests were trying to come up with a reason so that they didn't have to attend. Instead, it was them choosing other priorities which the culture around them deemed as appropriate options and excuses.

Last week in his sermon Pastor Neil said that the parable is an evocative and provocative teaching model and we begin to see this reality today in verse 21. Up until this point everything is following the usual acceptable plan. However in verse 21 rather than inviting others from the same social circle, the host turns to the streets of the city, bringing in the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Side note – the host tells the servants to go to the suburbs to extend the invitations. Suburbs then are not the same of suburbs now. “Then and for long afterward suburbs were the least desirable places to live.”ⁱⁱⁱ The servant returns from the suburbs and tells the host that there is still room. So again the servant is sent out now to compel the transients on public roads to come to the feast. Again, just “dinner as usual” with Jesus.

Now back to my earlier question. Which character did you find yourself identifying with in this passage? Our pastoral team meets every Tuesday morning for our team meeting. We begin each week by sharing together in a devotional which we take turns leading. A couple weeks ago Pastor Katie led us in a Lectio Divina type of bible study of this very passage. We read it three different times with prompts to look for a word, then an image, and then a possible learning or challenge for us today. There was time to hear God's word, time to sit in silence

before God's word, and times to invite the Spirit to guide our insight and engagement. Well I'm here to tell you that sometimes our "come to Jesus moments" are painful!

The first time reading through the text I found that I was naturally identifying with the host and feeling really bad for the host. And I was also feeling bad for those offering excuses as I was feeling quite superior in thinking that clearly I would know what it was I was missing and so therefore I would never offer such frivolous excuses, even if society told me such excuses were perfectly acceptable.

After hearing the text the second time I began to ponder who are the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind and how am I doing in inviting them to my table, or to God's table? I was still feeling pretty bad for them. I mean they are invited because they cannot repay the host. It isn't like well I invite you to my banquet and then you invite me to yours. It also wasn't a potluck. These individuals in that society were not ones equipped with the resources to offer to bring a side dish or dessert. They could attend, but would come empty handed, and nor would they be able to extend a reciprocal invitation to the host. I was feeling really sorry for them.

And then came the painful, powerful, persistent "Come to Jesus moment." Cynthia Elaine Wiltheiss Voth. You are the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Oh how self-righteous I am. Oh how I am the one in need of a Savior. I am the one in need, arriving to the party empty handed, with deep and profound needs to receive, to be fed, to be healed, to be made whole. Suddenly my perspective changed and I began to ask, ok God, what are the ways that I am poor, and crippled, lame, and blind? What do I not see clearly? What do I lack in spiritual resources? How am I limping along, not thriving in life?

Friends, I believe that we are each called to understand how it is that we too are poor, crippled, lame, and blind for it is only when we know that we need a Savior that we can fully

turn ourselves to the table and feast with our Lord Jesus Christ. If we believe that we are self-sufficient and only ever see ourselves in the role of the host, the religious elite, or the upper social class we will miss out on the invitation and the gift of healing, redemption, and receiving nourishment for our souls. In short, we will miss Jesus.

Now joining the poor, crippled, lame, and blind is actually our profound calling as followers of Jesus. Joining with them we join kingdom people. Clear back from Mary's song in Luke chapter 1 it has been clear that these are kingdom people. Do we desire to become kingdom people? If so, then we must find ways that we too identify with them. This means friends that we must climb down from our lofty self-righteous comfortable tower. It means that we must change the lenses in which we view ourselves and others. It means that we must recognize and even celebrate the ways that we need Jesus. To celebrate our weaknesses and ways we too are broken. We cannot be self-sufficient. Like those who attended the banquet empty handed, we too come to Jesus recognizing that it is he who invited us, and it is he who will provide.

Now another thought in closing. It really struck me this week that when the servant returns to the city the poor, lame, crippled, and blind accept the invitation to come to the banquet. Did you catch that? They, like us, could still offer excuses. Sometimes our excuses come because we are seeking other outlets to try to meet our needs, sometimes in healthy or unhealthy ways. And yet in our text the kingdom people said yes.

Most of you will know that I was raised in a wonderful American Baptist Church in Ohio. Every Sunday's worship service ended with an altar call. Every Sunday. Now, don't worry my dear beloved Mennonites, I'm not going to lead us in an altar call. However I do want to call each of us to a decision, something that is not always our strongest suit as Mennonites.

We have been invited to the table of Jesus. Will you come? We have each been invited to identify ourselves with kingdom people – the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. Will you? Friends, it will be a feast! A feast we will come to with empty hands and offer our profound needs. And then at the table may we receive - we will be fed, healed, and filled with peace. Hallelujah!

I invite us now to a time of silence to consider the invitation before each of us. Following our time of silence we will be listening to a song by Chris Tomlin entitled “The Table,” a song Mark discovered as he was preparing for today’s service. And thanks to Janet the lyrics will be projected on the screen. May the words and music continue to guide our reflections and prayers.

You are invited to the table. You are invited to identify with kingdom people. How will you respond?

May it be so.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation Bible Commentary: Luke* (John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky), 176.

ⁱⁱ Debi Thomas, “Table Manners,” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1070-table-manners>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Brazos Commentary of the Bible: Luke* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 187.