

## “Kingdom Hospitality”

August 28, 2022

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-3, 16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Dinner parties feature prominently in the stories about Jesus, especially in Luke’s gospel, but they take place in the others too. And like many scenes in the gospels what we read isn’t all that’s happening. Dinner parties are often more than just social gatherings. They’re used to size others up, to see where we stand. I’ve never attended a formal dinner or a state dinner, but the seating arrangement in those gatherings is important. You don’t want to place the wrong people next to each other. If you’ve ever arranged the seating at a wedding reception you may have had to make those decisions.

More casual gatherings shouldn’t have those kinds of pressures. But this dinner on the Sabbath isn’t entirely casual. They’re watching Jesus closely, we’re told, and he’s keeping an eye on them. He notes how the guests scramble for the best seats, the seats of honor near the host. You can imagine him sitting down among them, looking at them one at a time, bemused by them. Then he pulls out an old chestnut, nothing original at all. He quotes Proverbs to them, a little nugget of advice. They shift in their seats, a little embarrassed.

He may not be trying to shame them, though...not entirely. I think he’s calling them back to their roots, back to the wisdom of their ancestors. Their behavior at the dinner table reveals they’ve been influenced by Roman values. A Roman dinner party was an exercise in social conditioning. There is a letter by a philosopher in the first century describing his experience at a wealthy friend’s dinner party. The friend invited people from all social classes, then seated them in order of their status: the highest near him and the lowest at the other end of the table. Then he proceeded to serve them based on their status: the higher status folks receiving the best food and wine, the lowest status the worst. The letter writer is appalled by this, but admits it’s all too common. Maybe Jesus was aware of that kind of behavior. It wouldn’t be the first time an occupied population emulated their oppressors.

But Jesus seems to think they’re meant for something else. The wisdom of the ancestors counsels them to humble themselves. Take the lowest seat at the table. Then he expands that wisdom a little. He points them to a new reality where those who exalt themselves are humbled and those who humble themselves are exalted. We heard this theme at the very beginning of Luke’s story when Mary sang about God’s goodness; about how God would remove the mighty from their thrones and raise up the lowly, how God would fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. In Jesus’ world even simple dinner parties are more than they seem. They’re opportunities to reveal the new order of God’s kingdom, a radical hospitality where all are invited to share in the meal, where all have a place at the table.

If that’s the world we’re hoping to build, the world we believe God intends us to build, then radical kingdom hospitality is the key. How do we place ourselves at the lowest end of the

table and make room for people who are vulnerable and hurting at the highest end? What do we need to change in our life together as a church, in our community in Amherst and Buffalo, in our society as a nation to reverse the order of wealth and privilege?

That may sound vindictive or punitive at first, but I never have the impression that Jesus means to punish people who are wealthy or privileged. He isn't vilifying the other guests at the dinner for trying to grab a seat at the head of the table. If anything he feels a little sorry for them. He watches them slaving away to satisfy the demands of a society whose rules aren't worth observing. So he opens their eyes to the possibility of a new world, a world where they can let go of pointless ambition and meaningless status. Their eyes are opened to the world of their ancestors where humility and generosity determine worth and not possessions.

He calls his followers to a deeper awareness of their capacity to change the world through their own actions. How they organize themselves matters. How they gather even to eat a typical Sabbath meal matters. Kingdom hospitality is intentional and mindful. It makes us aware of who we are and where we stand in relation to others. It's concerned with radical empathy, as described by the writer of Hebrews who encourages his audience "to remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured." And it calls us to see the presence of God in each other through mutual love, to regard each other as though we were entertaining angels, which in fact we are.

The power of this hospitality is to relieve us of our illusions that status matters. Even as it models a more just and compassionate world, it frees us of the hold our constant pursuit of power has on us. But it's not magic. Jesus's words don't change people instantly. The other guests at that dinner might not have left feeling any different. But he may have planted a seed. And maybe that's all we're able to do. All we can do is model the kind of world God desires us to build and hope that what we do will have an influence on the people who come here and on those we encounter outside these walls. The church has the potential to influence change in the world far beyond our modest numbers.

But we need to be clear that we offer an alternative, that we aren't just mimicking society's values. We need to reach back into our past. We need to reconnect with the wisdom of our ancestors and take stock of our values and our practices. Jesus invites the people around him to remember who they are, to remember what's really important. And he invites us to do the same, to have the courage to let go of our desire for status or recognition or reciprocation and give freely, make room humbly, and build a world, even if it's only in our little corner, a world of compassion and justice, where everyone has a place, everyone is seen and all are welcomed in the circle of the family of God.

Amen