

Luke 14: 1-14 Places at the Table

Sometimes when we think about the narrative stories we have received about Jesus they merge in our minds and the details seem to blend. This is especially true when we take a passage each Sunday and look for the message within it. Each passage actually is multi-leveled and can convey a variety of things for us to consider which doesn't make any one thing lifted up that more essential than the other. But sometimes we get a deeper meaning if we look beyond the one passage. Today's passage is like that. We are very aware of the ways in which Jesus viewed the world differently than did the religious leaders of his day. We almost uniformly associate the Pharisees with the concept of being the enemies of Christ. Yet in this passage we have the third description of a dinner which Jesus accepted to be the guest in the home of a Pharisee. The first occurred in chapter 7 when Simon invited Jesus to dinner and failed to greet him with the expected hospitality. Simon is trying to determine if Jesus is a prophet. That narrative also contained the advent of an uninvited guest which proves to Simon that Jesus cannot be a prophet. This provided the illustration for Jesus' upbraiding for his ungraciousness as a host and praise for the woman's repentance. This occurred before he set his face toward Jerusalem. The second invitation he received and accepted occurred in chapter 11. On that occasion, Jesus takes his place at the table without washing his hands. This washing was not that done for hygienic reasons, but was based on religious ritual. Jesus then talks to those gathered at the table about what truly makes a person unclean...the greed and wickedness that is internal in a full scale dressing down of their motives. He even predicts God's judgment on them for their failures to attend to justice and love of God. When Jesus departs it is clear these Pharisees are hostile to Jesus and looking for ways to cause his downfall. Yet here we are in the 14th chapter, still moving toward Jerusalem and the cross awaiting him and he accepts another invitation from a Pharisee to join him for dinner. Our passage begins "on one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely." Jesus' words and actions have definitely brought him close scrutiny by the religious leaders of his time which might explain the invitation, but not why Jesus accepted it. This passage connects briefly with the one last week when Jesus healed the woman at the synagogue who had been crippled for eighteen years and his words afterwards caused those who criticized him shame. Luke describes it this way: "Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy." From the placement of this verse we cannot tell if the man was in the Pharisee's house or just outside it, providentially. So we don't know if the man with dropsy was a plant by the Pharisee's who were watching Jesus to test what he would do on a Sabbath or not. Obviously, because last week's lectionary passage was concerned with the issue of healing on the Sabbath, the lectionary leaves out verses 2-6 which I chose to read. We already know how Jesus views the matter of healing and how he views Sabbath keeping. Jesus essentially repeats his actions with the crippled woman—he heals and then challenges the lawyers and Pharisee's present about what is lawful to be done on a Sabbath. "If one of you has a child, or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" The well being of the living is more important than the ritual, because the law in this instance because the law was designed by God to be a benefit to people. Again, although they probably wanted to berate Jesus, they could not reply to this question without admitting

their hypocrisy. The beginning of this third dinner has not gotten an auspicious start—much like the other two. It makes you wonder why these folks still are inviting Jesus to dine with them again. Perhaps the Pharisees think that this time they can humiliate him publicly through the seating arrangements, the places at the table. In the culture of the day, the guests would have been assigned a couch upon which do recline while they were dining. These places would have been assigned keeping in mind each person’s status in society and the possibility of good conversation between neighbors. The top places were generally near the center of the room. In this passage however, the places are not assigned but the guest are choosing where they will sit. By doing this, the Pharisee host is allowing each person to judge his own station and put himself in the proper place. We are told that after observing this Jesus tells the guests a parable. On the surface this parable may seem like some wise advice like that given by Dear Abby or Miss Manners on how to behave in public. Since this parable is told in the second person, it is very easy to see it as shrewd social advice about how to conduct oneself in an ordinary situation. On the surface it sounds somewhat like the counsel given in wisdom literature like Proverbs. But the parables of Jesus all have an underlying purpose—to illustrate and help us understand God’s reign. What Jesus observes is that the guests are choosing the places of honor. These guests are choosing to go to the best seats, preparing to enjoy the wittiest conversation and to have the full attention of all the other guests with the public esteem that will come from eating at such an exalted position. The scene Jesus describes in the parable does not follow this implied self-chosen script. Instead, Jesus proposes that the host noticing that the guest sitting in that self-chosen best seat might be asked to relocate when a more important guest arrives. At that point the only seat left would be the seat of the lowest honor. The parable ends with the proposition that if you take the lowest seat, you do so with the hope that the host might relocate you to the highest seat. That is not being humble, but being hypocritical. These choices are all based in the honor/shame culture that prevailed in first century Palestine and the entire Greco-Roman world. In the narrative Jesus presents the issue is not really about where someone eats, but the proposition that being elevated to a different seat will make you feel better about yourself. It is about what determines in your own mind whether or not you are valued. While we don’t usually approach setting the places at our tables in quite the same manner on most occasions, we do still have internal ways of looking at others and deciding where they rank in our world. Social ranking still is a powerful thing in our society. Often it is more a case of who we accept sitting at the table, who we would invite to even be a guest in our home or whose home we would be comfortable visiting. Jesus’ summary to this parable is a well-known aphorism: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus has moved from the Pharisee’s table to the one God sets in the kingdom. Jesus is telling them that whatever status humans assign to each other does not matter. If you remember back to the opening of Luke, the song attributed to Mary in the “Magnificat” speaks of this same type of reversal of the world’s order by God. Jesus is indicating that to be a follower of his means giving up the networks of family and friends that secures your place in society and to accept a new set of values. It becomes clear that this is the aim of what Jesus is teaching when he goes on to tell his host that when he holds these dinner parties, his guest list should be entirely different. “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case

they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.” Jesus is advocating the abandonment of status seeking or confirming social dinners and saying that the guests invited to join the meals should be “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” because they cannot repay you. Inviting them will not solidify or improve your social status, but if you want a place at the table in God’s kingdom that will be what you do. This proposed invitation is not set like the original parable which was a special occasion, a wedding banquet, but is instead set as “when you give a luncheon or dinner” or in other words at any time, or maybe all the time when you invite guests, include these folks. This proposal by Jesus subverts expectations that social payment and repayment should govern life in God’s kingdom community. It challenges the backbone of the existing social system of patronage endemic to the first century world by calling for inclusion of those who cannot return the invitation. Jesus’ promise is that God will repay such hospitality at the “resurrection of the righteous.” At this point it is clear that the parable is not about good table manners but has moved into the eschatological future of God’s kingdom. In our table manners with one another we may see poking through not just our real selves revealed for what we are, but God’s true table purposes. What is being given is not just good or wise advice but something profound and prophetic about God and God’s expectations for our behavior. This picture discloses in the midst of a description about our ordinary and messy way of doing things, God’s good purposes and intentions. It is important that we see this not as another description of a box to be checked off in order to secure God’s good graces and earn heavenly payback—we are invited to a place at God’s table not through merit, but grace. We are welcomed at that table by grace. But the confidence we have in that welcome will set us free from the world’s standards of social acceptability and status. This passage reminds us to be like Jesus and observe, to take notice of those around us and consider our own system for making seating arrangements. It is not only about where we choose to go and sit, but who have we invited. Do we notice not only who has been invited to the table but who is missing? Jesus tells us these are the markers of the kingdom community of God—all are invited welcomed to the table. The places there are not determined by human standards of status but by God’s grace. Thanks be to God.