

Introduction:

- A. If Luke had been a film director instead of a writer the first thing we would see—his establishing shot—would be a table set for Shabbat. White tablecloth, candles, the twined challah bread, glasses of wine. The camera would pan out from the low table surrounded by cushions. We would see Jesus coming into an ancient Jewish dining room accompanied by officious, suspicious Pharisees, robed and tassled, pushing in past him to get to the best seats. And then we'd spy a man who definitely didn't belong. But Luke was a writer, and here's how he begins: *"One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched."*
- B. Sabbath dinner. That is a meal with a meaning. Flavored with hope. It was to be a foretaste of heaven. The eternal day of rest begun with the Lord's Great Feast. It is a common and powerful image that runs all through the Bible. Now this particular Sabbath dinner was about to have an unexpected splash of hot sauce. Turn to **Luke 14** so you can see and hear all that happens.
- C. Wait! There's some kind of hold-up; a disturbance. Oh, this is awkward. How did he get in here? *"There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body"* v.2. They used to call this dropsy. Now we call it edema. This man was ballooning up with fluids. Puffy, bloated. Eeww! That's very unpleasant. The guests are liable to lose their appetites. Actually, they sharpened their knives.
Vv.3-4...
- D. This was a showdown between these Pharisees and Jesus. The Law of Moses says that on the Sabbath no work is to be done. None. The rabbis had extrapolated all kinds of rules from that. For example, a tailor could not carry his needle. I read how they'd debate over how one could legally give alms to a beggar on the Sabbath without either

of them working. I read, *“The only guilt-free way to give alms on Sabbath: the beggar stands outside, stretches forth his hand inside the house, and the householder puts the alms in his hand for him.”* [A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*; quoted in www.tidings.org/studies/legalism] So if Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath was that work? And if he *did* heal then it couldn’t be God at work. Jesus doesn’t argue that it isn’t work. But he points to a practical precedent for healing on the Sabbath: **vv.5-6...** Silence. Glaring. *“You’re comparing pomegranates and dates,”* was probably what they were thinking. But no one argued with Jesus.

OK. The man is gone. Glad that’s over with. The Pharisees have all harrumphed over Jesus, the blatant Sabbath-breaker, and the tension of the feud still hangs in the air. Now, where were we? Oh yes, dinner.

The guests were all jockeying for the places of honor nearest the host; a kind of high-end game of musical chairs. Broad-shouldered egotists out-maneuvered by ambitious young rabbis with quick inside moves. Aleph males all elbowing for their places in the pecking order.

But Jesus saw it all and even before everyone had adjusted the cushions on which they reclined around the table he spoke. **Vv.7-11...** (I imagine the smirk on the face of the guy who ended up at the foot of the table.)

- A. Look closely at what Luke tells us. First, he tells us in **v.7** that this is a parable. It doesn’t *seem* like a parable. There’s no real story in it. It *seems* like the kind of thing your mom would tell you. It *seems* like an etiquette lesson. But it is a parable—the kind of story that carries an open secret to anyone “who has ears to hear.” It means something more than meets the eye.
- B. The first clue is that this is not like the meal Jesus was attending. This is about a wedding feast. Hmmm. Why is this about a wedding feast and not a Sabbath dinner? Is it

both? Those two meals converged at God's Great Feast in heaven. So is God the host in this story? Is this about the Great Feast that inaugurates the everlasting life?

- C. So let me get this straight. When we go to that Wedding Feast in heaven the smart thing to do is go in low. And the really risky behavior would be to assume a seat of high honor lest you be demoted in front of God and everybody. **So humility is how you get ahead in God's kingdom.**

I. WHEN IT COMES TO THE ONE FEAST THAT MATTERS MOST, THE HIGHEST PLACES GOES TO THE HUMBLEST PEOPLE

"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

But wait now. At God's Feast people won't actually be able to sit at the wrong table. People won't actually scramble for the most honored seats *then*, will they? I mean, *then* everything is decided, right? So how would this work? How would a person humble themselves so that they might be exalted at God's Wedding Feast?

- A. **V.12...** This *isn't* a parable now. Jesus is telling his prominent host how to manage his social calendar. Jesus is telling him that this social custom of exchanging invitations is a sort of zero-sum game. I buy you dinner so you buy me dinner. I have my friends over. They have me over. It's a wash. All that expense and no one is any the richer. But Jesus has an alternative:

Vv.13-14... That prominent man had never heard anything so preposterous in his life. No one would do that! What would be the point? I mean, you can't really take "God's blessing" to the bank, can you. It's not going to get you a better seat in the boardroom. To be "*repaid at the resurrection of the righteous*" is pretty much "*pie in the sky bye and bye.*" Let's not mix business and religion.

- B. Now understand that these rich Jews always gave to the poor. They did that publicly, so everyone would appreciate

their generosity. But Jesus wasn't talking about *charity* here. He was talking about honor, about fellowship, about having these outcasts at your table with you.

Conversation, expense, *servng them!* You saw that man who was here at the beginning, all swollen and desperate. I can't invite him to dinner! What would we talk about? What would we have in common? Why would I do that?!

- C. One reason, of course, would be to *honor* the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. As a sheer gift to them. A favor. **Grace!** Give them dignity and kindness they cannot earn. It would be positively divine!

But the main reason the host should show *grace* is because *he* needs it so badly. In God's kingdom, to get ahead, **you have to have friends in low places.**

You cannot honor the lowly people around you while quietly thinking you're better than them. It would be like two singers caterwauling in different keys! It actually takes humility to serve the lowly; to say, "*I'm not too good for this.*" **Humility is the prerequisite of grace. And that's what these stories are about: giving and receiving grace.**

- D. Who in your life, outside your family, do you invite to your banquet? Who is your the golden opportunity to show grace? Who have you made friends with? Who do you serve who cannot serve you in return? How about the gruff neighbor. The weird kid. Someone at the nursing home. You'll have to go out of your way, you know.
- E. And that brings us back to the matter of rewards. In **v.11** Jesus said that "*those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" Now here in **v.14** he says that those who are hosts to the outcasts "*will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*" So those who humble themselves and those who invite the poor and disabled to their tables get the same reward. That's because it is the same person. Only the humble serve the lowly. So....

II. INVEST IN GRACE, LIKE GOD DOES, FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Well, you could’ve cut the tension in that dining room with a butter knife. So one guy just tries to ease things a bit. He claps his hand, smiles like a politician, and in **v.15**, *“said to Jesus, ‘Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.’”* I love how **Robert Capon** describes that move: *“he takes the first spiritual bus that comes along and gets out of town. In effect he says, ‘Ah, resurrection! I can’t say that I follow your odd little ideas about dining with cripples, but I do agree with what you say about heaven. It’s so comforting to hear that everything’s going to work out perfectly in the end... [But Jesus] launches straight into a story that bumps his hearers off the bus bound for the heavenly suburbs and deposits them back in the seediest part of town.”* [Parables of Grace, pp.130-131]

The man was right, of course. In fact, what he said could be the heading of this whole dinner story: *“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* Truer words were never spoken! But Jesus had another parable to tell: **vv.16-17...**

- A. Let’s parse this parable. Who is the **“certain man”** who prepared the feast? God. What is **“the great banquet”**? The heavenly Feast, the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Who are the **“many invited guests”**? The Jews—the Chosen People—to whom Jesus went. And the **invitation**, *“Come, for everything is now ready,”* is the news they’ve all been waiting for. So far, so good. And I suspect that Jesus’ audience gets this parable and they nod their heads.

What I’m sure they didn’t get was that the **servant** sent out with the summons to the feast was Jesus himself. Jesus was the invitation. And there was the rub.

- B. But then this: **vv.18-21...** This is a banquet invitation without an RSVP because no one in their right mind would

miss this banquet. If you miss this, there's no tomorrow. Not only that, but this host—God—is not one you want to anger with your excuses. There is no excuse for missing this Feast. The Holy Host was angry because this banquet was for them. Ages of preparation and grace had gone into it and now they refused with cheap excuses.

- C. So what's to be done? **Vv.22-24...** God invites the very people Jesus told the dinner guests to invite. Not to a heavenly soup kitchen with derelicts holding out their bowls before some patient angel, but to God's banquet; to Jesus' own wedding feast, dressed as the bride herself. First, this is a picture of Jesus' invitation to outcast Jews but when all of them have been invited, there is still room so God's servants are sent out to search every highway and country lane for others—for Gentiles like us, invited from all over the world. *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel."*
- D. When the master says, *"compel them to come in,"* we know that God does not use force, but he is doggedly persistent in pursuing guests for his banquet. *Don't take 'no' for an answer!* He is "The Hound of Heaven." **God is relentlessly hospitable.** Heaven will be full of people astonished not only that they were invited—but dumb-founded that they were pursued and pestered by God's grace in Christ to come to such an exalted place.
- E. Ultimately, God does not keep people from heaven. He does everything possible to bring them in. The only people who will not be at God's feast are those who refused his invitation, who sent an excuse.

III. THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE IS URGENTLY REQUESTED AT GOD'S GREAT FEAST. BUT BEWARE OF EXCUSES!

Conclusion

So of all the guests at this dinner Jesus' attended at the home of the "prominent Pharisee," do you think there was anyone

besides Jesus who will be at God's Great Feast? **Maybe one.** So far as we can see, one qualified: the sick man whom Jesus healed. No one set an extra place for him then. He wasn't invited to stay. A shame, really. He was just the kind of dinner guest Jesus enjoys.

I like that Village Church is usually good at welcoming people who are hurting or lonely or needy. I love how some of you go out looking to build relationships with people who don't walk well or who are way off the beaten track. And such were some of us!

Over the years, this church as welcomed some prominent people—even some famous people. But they don't define us, or certainly shouldn't. But here's a story we shouldn't forget. Here's a story that should define Village Church.

Illus.: About 25 years ago, a man named Jim came to church here at VCL. No one knows how he found his way here. He was a Vietnam vet, wounded in mind and heart, who lived alone in near poverty in a trailer in Lake Bluff. He drank too much and didn't take very good care of himself. In fact, because of his drinking and everything he suffered from "abnormal swelling in his body." Puffy and bloated, and not very appealing. But he showed up in church. And that posed a problem, of course because he made folks uncomfortable. I'd have probably felt the same way.

But the pastor at the time—another Pastor Lee—welcomed him. That Pastor Lee and his wife Joyce had Jim for dinner. So did Don and Nancy Molinari. Jim became a Christian. Don gave him a Bible. Jim would come and just sit here alone in this sanctuary because he felt peaceful. He sat around a campfire one night till 3 a.m. listening in amazement to Christians tell their stories

Eventually, Jim volunteered to cut the grass and take care of flowers around here. Problem was, he would do it on Sunday morning before church, and then come into church in his cut-offs, smelling of alcohol and grass and gasoline. He was a challenge and he never really got his life all put together. But people here welcomed him to the table.

Jim died about three years later. Don found him dead in his trailer. And now that humble, blessed brother waits for us and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.