

## A PLACE AT THE TABLE

*Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, August 28, 2016*

*Ordinary 22 – FCCH, 9:30 a.m. – Last Summer Sunday*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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....

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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.” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a 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. 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.”



HOSPITALITY  
IS NOT ABOUT INVITING PEOPLE  
INTO OUR PERFECT HOMES;  
IT IS ALL ABOUT  
INVITING PEOPLE INTO OUR  
IMPERFECT HEARTS

“Ah, etiquette, and the thorny question of the return invitation.” So begins a reflection by Lauren Winner on today's gospel reading. She continues:

“Parties in private homes, whether lunches, brunches, cocktails or dinner parties, do require a return invitation,' I read in a 1987 edition of Emily Post. Also: even if you decline an invitation, you're still supposed to reciprocate, though the obligation to do so is 'milder' than if you had accepted. And also: if you do offer a 'pay-back' invitation and you are declined, you are supposed to issue at least one more, and preferably two more invitations.”<sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure how many of us in 2016 would turn to Emily Post for instructions in the etiquette of the return invitation. We wouldn't need Emily Post to remind us of one of our common cultural expectations: if someone invites you to dinner at their home, you will be expected to invite them to dinner at your home.

Jesus' teaching in today's text stands over against this common cultural expectation—which was probably not much different in the first century from what it is today. “When you give a luncheon or a 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. 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.”

Whether or not we turn to Emily Post for guidance in social interactions, for us there is a built-in connection between hospitality and reciprocity. Hospitality and reciprocity have to do with social equality. If I invite you to my house for dinner, and you invite me to your house for dinner, we stand on an equal footing with each other. There is no indebtedness between us. However, if you invite me to your house for dinner, and I am unable to invite you to my house for dinner, we are no longer on an equal footing with each other. I am unable to reciprocate.

When we turn instead to Jesus for guidance in social interactions, we are challenged to cast a critical eye on our common practices and presuppositions. Such as: scrambling to be seated at a place of honor. Sharing in the practice of hospitality and reciprocity among our social equals.

Lauren Winner, whose words I quoted earlier, shares with her readers her own inner dialogue about Jesus' challenge to our common practices and presuppositions:

*“Me: Of course, in reality no one in real life in the twenty-first-century middle-class here [where I live] would really invite the halt and the lame over to dinner, so I probably need to metaphorize this a little.*

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<sup>1</sup><http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/new-testament/lect22cgospel/>.

“Hospitality is not about inviting people into our perfect homes. It’s all about inviting people into our imperfect hearts.”

*“Me again: Except for my friend S, my nearest and dearest (who lives in an intentional Christian community of hospitality, a sort of New Monastic Catholic worker kind of thing, and invites people who are halt and lame to dinner all the time).”<sup>2</sup>*

Here are three of the most common ways in which we as Christians try to manage this tension between our expectations of etiquette and Jesus’ teaching about humility and generosity.

- When we celebrate communion, we extend an expansive invitation to an open table. All are welcome at this table at which Jesus is the host: no exceptions, no exclusions.
- When we do things to help others, we are indirectly helping the “halt and lame” to share in our abundance. Food pantry, school supplies, clothing. Preparing and serving Sunday dinner at St Vincent de Paul in Middletown is a way of sharing a meal with people we would never invite into our own homes.
- When we participate in a coalition that is helping refugee families fleeing violence and persecution in their home countries to build a new life for themselves in our country, we are welcoming them into our imperfect hearts and our imperfect country. (I heard recently that some previous sponsors of HCC’s golf tournament have declined to be sponsors this year because they object to our support of refugee resettlement. Sometimes the courage to do the right thing can be costly.)

Today is the 53<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr Martin Luther King Jr gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

“I have a dream that one day the children of former slaves and the children of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” and sisterhood.

Langston Hughes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

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<sup>2</sup><http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/new-testament/lect22cgospel/>.