

(Luke 14:1 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

<sup>8</sup> "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; <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

## Reciprocity and the Realm of God

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At first they smiled and nodded, no doubt. They had invited Jesus to dinner. That is, the leader of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to dinner.

The Pharisees are not an easy group to understand. In the Gospel's they are portrayed as pushy officials, as representatives of the Jewish power structure, and as one of Jesus' main opponents. They are pictured as the purity police, part and parcel with those who finally call for Jesus to die. Especially on this latter point there is a great deal of doubt. In Roman controlled Judea Jewish religious leaders had no influence whatsoever over Roman capital punishment. If anything, the Jews sought desperately to keep from catching the notice of the capricious and cruel Roman military.

And therein lies perhaps the kernel of truth about the Pharisees as we see them in the Gospels. The Pharisees saw themselves as protectors of societal harmony. They were Emily Post or Martha Stewart with a political/religious agenda. The Pharisees wanted to keep the Jews below the Roman radar, and the best way, they thought, to do that was to live an orderly life. And their way of life was sane and reasonable. The Pharisees rejected the zealotry of the revolutionaries, for they rightly understood that would lead to disaster. The Pharisees also rejected the withdrawal into the desert, like the Qumran community of Dead Sea Scroll fame. The Pharisees rightly, also, understood that withdrawal was a dead end. The Pharisees thought the best way for the Jews was for them to live in society but to live in a way that would keep peace and harmony. So, the Pharisees became the main proponents of the ancient codes for living a good and trouble free life.

So, back to our story. At first they smiled and nodded, no doubt. The leader of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to dinner. The social conventions required two very important things. The social conventions for a guest at dinner required one, that the guest be prepared to articulate theological wisdom, and two, that the guest not offend the host. I suppose things haven't changed that much. We still want dinner guests who are interesting conversationalists, so long as they are not so controversial as to cause offense.

Jesus proved remarkably adept at the theological task. He noticed how all the guests naturally gravitated to the seats of honor. You remember from James and John wanting special seats in heaven with Jesus that the seating arrangements in Jesus' time were very important. Jesus looks around and sees the guests headed for the seats of honor, and he makes reference to a line from the Proverbs. Proverbs 25:6-7 says, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." Jesus tells the guests that they are far wiser to choose the lowest seat at the table. If they choose the highest seat, the host may come and ask them to move down

because a higher guest has been invited, and they will be embarrassed. But if they choose the lowest seat at the table, the host will almost inevitably come and say, No, no, you must sit up higher; you are an honored guest. By humbling themselves they will be exalted, rather than humbled because they have sought to exalt themselves.

This was the kind of wisdom expected of a good dinner guest. And the wisdom Jesus suggested promoted the kind of living which made for harmony. On both counts the Pharisees had to be thrilled with their guest. I'm sure they nodded at each other and thought to themselves that this man was just fine.

But then Jesus kept talking. He continued the theme of how one could be exalted by being humble. He told his host, "When you give a dinner don't invite your friends and your neighbors. What happens when you invite those you know? They invite you to dinner at their house. And then you are repaid."

At this point the host was thinking to himself, "Well what's wrong with that? That's how it is supposed to work. If I do something for my friend, or my family member or my neighbor, then of course they are to return the favor. It is good manners to show your appreciation for what has been done for you by returning the favor. It is good manners to say thank you. It is good manners to return dinner invitations. It is good manners to be as generous back as someone is to you." And the host thought to himself, "I expect that from my guests and my acquaintances, and I should."

Jesus went on, "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."

Can you hear the echoes in the Pharisee's head? Can you hear the words that are the commonplace understanding in Jesus' time? "Who sinned, this man or his father that he is blind?" What sin did this man do that he is lame and poor? Job's friends, you recall, pestered him for thirty something chapters with something like this: Job, look, you have lost your house, you have lost your family, you have lost your possessions and now you are sick as a dog. For goodness sake man, admit that you have sinned before something more terrible than even these things happens to you.

Swirling in the Pharisee's head is the unambiguous logic: Why would I invite the poor and the lame and the blind to eat with me. They are the way they are because they deserve it, because they are sinners. How do I know that? I know it because people get what they deserve. You say they are too poor or physically unable to return a dinner invitation. Well, I say to you that they aren't the kind of people who return dinner invitations. They aren't the right kind of people. And if you don't believe it, look at them. They are a mess, and there is a good reason they are a mess.

Jesus was a perceptive man. I suspect he could see all this going on in the Pharisee's head. And I imagine Jesus thought to himself, "Whoops, I was doing really well, but I think I just got myself in trouble again." And the Pharisee concluded his thinking by saying to himself, "I guess the things I heard about this man Jesus are right. He is a trouble-maker. He's the kind of person who will get all of us into trouble sooner or later. He is a sinner too.

\*\*\*\* What a challenging story this is. I was brought up with something like the values that the Pharisee held, the Pharisee who asked Jesus to dinner. I was taught that I said thank you when someone did something nice for me. I was taught that it was polite to return favors that

had been done for me. And I was taught to expect politeness and return of favors from other people as well. And I think in many respects they are fine teachings. We call ourselves a civil society, but sometimes I find it pretty uncivil. Just take a car ride in Cambridge or Boston and you are apt to encounter enough rudeness to last a lifetime. But as much as I value the politeness and the return of favors that I was taught, Jesus does raise some serious problems for us about them.

For Jesus the dinner table is the place of reckoning. Who do you have over for dinner? The answer to that questions says a lot in Jesus' scheme of things. And Jesus noted that when one insists on the social conventions of politeness to the extreme, certain groups of people are excluded. Those who are lame, blind or have disabilities, who inevitably in Jesus' time are poor, are not likely to be able to return the favor of a dinner invitation. And those with mental illnesses that make them unable to cope with or understand social conventions aren't either. In short, all those people listed on the Statue of Liberty were likely to be shunned in Jesus' time, and I'm not sure they aren't in ours, too.

And not only were these people excluded, but they were also judged. "Who sinned, this man or his father?" The good people of the ancient Near East got you coming and going. You weren't invited to dinner because you were unable to live up to the standards of polite society. And why weren't you able to live up to those standards? Because you were a sinner. And how did you know that such a person was a sinner. Because they couldn't live up to polite society's expectations. Jesus was upset that certain people were excluded from dinner, not just because they were lame, poor and the like, but because their lameness and poverty were seen as sure signs that they were sinners and that they should be excluded. You see, welfare reform which assumes that it's your own fault if you can't pull yourself by your own bootstraps has been around for longer than you might think. For Jesus the answer to the question, Who sinned, this man or his father? Is always, always, always, Neither this man nor his father sinned; he simply has the misfortune of his illness. He needs your help, not your condemnation.

The Pharisees are often painted as Jesus' opponents. And I've often wondered just why he kept going to dinner with them and engaging them in other situations, too. Why not just avoid them? Was Jesus just looking for a good fight every once in awhile? That doesn't seem right to me.

I think, perhaps, that Jesus was truly interested in the pharisees, as we was in all people. That is probably good news for us, who no matter our circumstance, are probably closer to the life and well being of a Pharisee than we are to the poor and the lame in Jesus' stories. Jesus hoped that the Pharisees might benefit from the wisdom of his teachings. Jesus hoped that they might benefit from the picture of the realm of God that painted through his stories, his sayings and his actions.

In that case, Jesus was not just interested in the poor and the lame, though perhaps his greatest interest lies there. But Jesus is also interested in the true development of human love, kindness and compassion. And Jesus recognized that love and generosity that expects something in return is quite unlike unconditional love and generosity. Love and generosity that expects something in return is too much about one's own self-importance. It's about putting another person in our debt. It's about seeing if we are properly thanked. It's about seeing if we receive a favor in kind. And Jesus knew that love and generosity that is really all about us cannot be about

giving. It very quickly become about receiving.

Jesus imagines love and generosity given without any expectation in return, given just because we want to, given just because it is the right thing to do. And think about this irony, any fulfillment we find in that kind of giving does not depend on how another receives it. The fulfillment comes simply from the act itself.

Jesus hoped the Pharisees might ultimately be a happier bunch, happier because they might come to give with open hearts rather than open hands, happier because they escaped the frenzy of favors given and favors returned, happier because their generosity would become real and complete.

When you put it all together, Jesus understood that a world in which all were included, in which the poor and the lame were not blamed for their condition, and a world in which a generous heart ruled the day, Jesus understood that such a world was very like the realm of God, and it is a world far better for every single person living in it. The realm of God is yours today if you will but live as if you are in it. Amen.

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