

## GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER: WEDDING GUESTS

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Text: Luke 14:1-24

Who is invited to sit at your table, be it literal or figurative? Who is invited to come and share a bit of your life from time to time or perhaps much of the time? As we have seen and heard over the past ten days, there are folks in our nation – white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and their ilk – who want their own table, a table that has no place for folks who are black or Jewish or gay or Mexican or refugees or anything but *white American* as they define *white* and *American*. They are proudly intolerant of difference, vocal in dissent, nationalistic in aim, and as they demonstrated last week in Charlottesville, can be violently defiant. Some of them claim to be Christian, but in word and in deed they renounce and denounce all that Jesus stood for, especially his call to love our neighbors as ourselves. That call of Christ does not give them or us opportunity to choose the neighbors we will love; we are called to love them all, even those who are very different from us or disagreeable to us, as the Parable of the Good Samaritan clearly illustrates. You cannot be racist and Christian at the same time, for to be a follower of Christ is to love ALL your sisters and brothers of every race, each and every one created by God in the image of God! The challenge for racists is to love those of another race; the challenge for us is to love the racists.

As Christians we are called to condemn all racism, its vile rhetoric, and the violence which is spawned by it. We are called to stand with those who are targets of prejudice, discrimination and hate; to defend them from harm; to help heal their wounds; to confront the ways in which we ourselves are racist or support systems that perpetuate racism; and to work for a just society in which all God's children sit at table together in the Kingdom of God here on earth. It is that kingdom in which we live now; the Kingdom of God is not just some future heavenly reward for the saints among us. It is a present reality, the reign of Christ under which we live and move and have our being today. The One who reigns is the one who calls us to a way of life that rejects a multitude of tables segregating people by race or nationality or sexual orientation or gender or even religion and invites all

to sit at one table as brothers and sisters created in the image of God and redeemed by the Son of God.

The fundamental fallacy in the reasoning of the racists, nationalists and all who seek to include some and exclude others from the family table is the claim that the table is ours and we are the hosts who can choose who is invited. As we heard in the parable and examples Jesus offered to the Pharisees, the table is not ours. The table belongs to God, and we are invited to come and sit and eat with our brothers and sisters, whether we claim them as siblings or not. The Pharisees saw themselves as guardians of the table, perhaps even hosts. But as Jesus makes clear, God is the host, and we are all invited guests, invited by a God who wants us to sit down, stop elbowing and throwing food and yelling at each other, and instead share together in the joyful feast of life to which we are invited.

Sitting at table in the home of a Pharisee Jesus offers some insight about that table to which all are invited. Luke says that a leader of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to dinner on the Sabbath. The host and his fellow Pharisees were watching Jesus closely, not as those who wanted to be his disciples and learn from him, but as those who were curious, skeptical or downright hostile to him. Aware of their close scrutiny, Jesus took advantage of the opportunity presented to him when the man with dropsy appeared. Pharisees were sticklers for the law, and the law banned any work on the Sabbath. Here stood a man who was in desperate need of healing, yet it was the Sabbath. The question was one of law or grace – forego the healing and obey the letter of the law or show mercy and heal the man in violation of the law? Is this table primarily about law or grace?

On NPR this week there was a Storycorps segment told by Francine Anderson, an African-American woman who grew up in rural Virginia in the 1950s. When she was about five, she and her siblings were riding in the car with their father late one night when the car ran out of gas on a dark stretch of road. Her father was able to push the car to the only place he could get to, a truck stop with a sign on the door reading, WHITES ONLY. Her father knocked on the door, hat in hand, and a white man opened the door. “Get away from here!” he said. “Can’t you read – WHITES ONLY!” “I see the sign, sir,” her father said. “I don’t want to disturb you or cause you

any trouble, but my car ran out of gas and I have my young kids in the car and wondered if I might buy a couple gallons of gasoline.” “I don’t deal with your kind,” said the man, and slammed the door. Francine said that her father returned to the car and climbed in; she could tell he was afraid. Then the truck stop door opened and another man came out and walked to the passenger side of the car. Francine remembers her father tensing up as the man approached. “I don’t know what’s wrong with that guy,” said the man. “I’m going to get you some gas, okay?” Her father offered to pay for it, but the man refused. It was an act of grace that defied the WHITES ONLY law in order to serve a family in need. Law or grace – that was his choice. He chose grace.

Which do you choose when you have to choose? From time to time we all are confronted with that choice, forced to choose between law and grace, between the expectations of the law of the land or our peers or strict social mores or some unspoken code of conduct and a need for grace or mercy or kindness. Which do you choose?

There at the table with the Pharisees and the man in need of healing, Jesus asked if it was lawful to cure people on the Sabbath. He challenged them to choose law or grace, but the Pharisees remained silent. They were unable or unwilling to choose. We are called to make that choice – as the kind man at the truck stop did – and choose grace. We are called to live grace-filled lives, to show mercy and love even when it conflicts with the letter of the law. When Francine Anderson tells her story to white folks, she says they focus as we did on the kindness of the man who helped. But when she tells the story to black folks, they respond with anger that the law of the land would permit the family in need to be refused service on the basis of their race. We should all be angry, angry that such laws existed and that such attitudes persist. It is grace to help that family in the night, but it is also grace to step up and work for justice to change the law and to change the attitudes that make such discrimination possible. The table Jesus invites us to is a table of grace!

But it is also a table marked by humility. Jesus noted that the guests of the Pharisees rushed to the places of honor, claiming for themselves an exalted seat. Jesus suggests a more humble way. “When you are invited to

a wedding banquet, don't sit in the place of honor; go sit in the lowest place." Why? Because it is better to be invited by the host to come up from that lowly place to a place of honor than to be asked to leave the place of honor to make room for someone more worthy. It is practical advice, but it is also advice that resonates with the example of Jesus' life – the messiah born in a lowly manger to a peasant girl, the carpenter rejected in his hometown, the teacher washing his disciples' feet, the healer ministering among the poor, the outcast and the sick. Jesus calls us to be servants, to be the ones serving not the ones seeking to be served. The Kingdom of God turns the world upside down – the first will be last and the last first, says Jesus. Why then do we try so hard to be first, to be noticed, to be exalted?

Go to a football game and watch what outlandish things people of all ages will do to get their face on the jumbotron! Watch the receiver dance and taunt the defense after a catch even though his team is losing by 30 points! Read on Facebook the intimate details of the lives of people who assume that you really want to know what they had for breakfast! Listen to the boasts of politicians who tell you they are the best and brightest and most respected and most persecuted while then declaring, "Of my many great qualities, humility is my best!" Listen to world leaders threaten to rain carnage down upon their enemies the likes of which the world has never seen, as if that could be a good thing. From the White House in Washington to the Big House at the University of Michigan to this house of prayer there is *too much* self-promotion and boasting, and *too little* true humility. "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled," says Jesus. "And those who humble themselves will be exalted." Do you believe that?

In his book *The Jesus Way* Eugene Peterson notes:

*From the Mount of Olives, a mile east of Jerusalem, looking south, Herod's burial mountain castle, Herodium, is still prominent on the horizon, while Jesus' birth cave is obscured by the lumpy church building. Nobody ever worships at Herodium.<sup>i</sup>*

Monuments don't make the man. The one we worship had no castle or grand palace in life or in death; he was humble and calls us to be like him.

The table to which Jesus invites us is a table at which there is a place for everyone to sit in peace if they will just leave their pride and greed and

hate and violence at the door. It is a table at which the rich and famous may be slow to gather or make excuses for their absence as Jesus described in the parable. But the divine host invites them anyway and has made room for more. There is room here for the poor and the sick, the stranger and the refugee, the saint and the sinner, and all the children of God. That is the table to which you are invited, the table of the family of God! You may not like some of the sisters and brothers who are sitting there – and they may not like you all that much either – but you are called to love them anyway, to sit with them anyway, to make them feel welcome anyway, to make room for them anyway as others made room for you. We are called to defend the victims of racism but we are also called to reach out to the racists with the grace of God in the hope that they will surrender the hate and embrace God's invitation to come to the table where we all sit together. For, we sit at that table solely by the grace of God and there we are blessed! God chooses grace. What then will you choose? Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007, p.200