**The Parables of Jesus**

**October 15, 2017**

**“The Parable of the Great Banquet” (Luke 14:7-24)**

**1. Introduction: The Dinner Party**

Whether we acknowledge it or not, dinner parties or any type of social gathering are laden with all sorts of expectations and social conventions. For instance, whenever I’m at a social gathering, I get a little worried that I’m going say or do something wrong. I’m fearful of committing a social *faux pas* that will embarrass either myself or my family. So, I find it best to stand or sit quietly in the corner and try not to stick out like a sore thumb.

 Poking fun at accepted social conventions was something that the 90’s sitcom *Seinfeld* did quite well. While some episodes of *Seinfeld* were not so funny and others were inappropriate, the show worked best when it held a mirror up to modern society and caused us to laugh at our cultural norms. One such episode, entitled, “The Dinner Party,” is quite pertinent to this morning’s Gospel lesson. In this episode the four main characters in the show, Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer are invited to a dinner party. As they are getting ready to leave, Elaine insists that they pick up a bottle of wine to take to the party. George asks, “Why?” to which Elaine replies, “Because its rude otherwise.” George fires back, “You mean just going there because I'm invited, that's rude?” and Elaine responds, “Yeah.” But George won’t let up, “So you're telling me instead of being happy to see me they're going to be upset because I didn't bring anything. You see what I'm saying?” Responding, Jerry adds, “The fabric of society is very complex George.” As the scene ends, George grumbles, “I just don't like the idea that every time there is a dinner invitation there's this annoying little chore that goes along with it.” To make matters worse, Elaine further insists that they should also bring a cake to the party.

 The rest of the episode follows their misadventures as they buy the wine and the cake. Every step of the way they face complications which make these simple errands much more difficult and time consuming. By the time they get the wine and the cake they are very late for the party. In addition, they are frustrated and miserable from the evening’s events and in no mood to party. When they ring the doorbell and the host opens the door, they simply hand her the wine and the cake, turn around and leave and the episode ends. The irony is that the host is left with a bottle of wine and a cake, while her guests, the people she wanted to come to the party, didn’t come in.

 In a subtle and subversive way, this episode of *Seinfeld* was critiquing the popular social expectation that one needs to bring a bottle of wine or a dessert to a dinner party because just showing up at the door isn’t enough. The task of getting these items became so taxing for the main characters that they didn’t even end up attending the party. It’s ironic because the whole intent of throwing a party is to socialize with your guests, not to get wine or cake. In our culture, dinner parties are laden with all kinds of spoken and unspoken expectations. Even if the host tells his or her guests not to bring anything, they feel obligated to do so anyway. At the same time, the host may feel pressure to have the perfect meal, the perfect table or a spotless house. The effort to achieve these things may be so great, it may cause one to hesitate to exercise hospitality. So, the expectations that we attach to dinner parties can become a deterrent to their aim, which is to break bread and socialize with people.

 Jesus’ society, like ours, had distinctive social conventions around hosting dinner parties. So when Jesus observed the behaviour of his fellow guests and his host, he spoke up and challenged these social norms customs by suggesting a better way – the way of humility and openhearted hospitality. His words in Luke 14 brought *kingdom* *values* to bear on everyday things like eating meals, but they also refer to that great banquet at the end of time when the *Kingdom of God* comes in all its fullness.

**2. Humility and Hospitality**

Luke 14:1 gives the setting for this episode; Jesus was at the house of the *ruler of the Pharisees*, enjoying a meal. So, right from the start we know that Jesus wasn’t eating at just anyone’s house; he was dining at the home of an important and well-respected religious figure in the community. William Barclay gives a vivid description of a dinner party in a first century Galilean home (*And Jesus Said,* p. 213). The table was a low solid block in a U-shape and arranged around it were low couches on which the guest reclined. The centre spot on the topside was reserved for the host and the places of honor were next to the host on the right and the left. He goes on to note that those from the lower class came early, grateful for the invitation, while the upper class folks came late. So, if one of the early comers took one of the seats of honour, there was a good chance that he or she would be asked to move when a person of greater importance arrived (Barclay, *And Jesus Said,* p. 213). Getting the best seat at the dinner table wasn’t just a matter of having access to the host or the food; it indicated your social status within the community. In Jesus’ day, gaining the esteem of or being honoured by those in your community was vitally important thing. *Honour* was a fundamental social value in Jesus’ day. Where you sat at the table was a clear marker of your honour status within the community.

Clearly, Jesus had been carefully observing the jockeying for position that was going on at this party. Luke 14:7 reads, “When Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honor near the head of the table, he gave them this advice:” His advice seems quite practical: Don’t sit in seat of honour because you risk embarrassment when the host asks you to give up your seat in favour of a more distinguished person. To make things worse, you’ll probably end up getting the only seat that’s left, the worst seat at foot of the table (14:8-9). Instead, Jesus advises that one should take the lowest place at the foot of the table so that when the host arrives he will move you up to a better place (14:10). Jesus adds an axiom that he frequently repeated throughout his ministry, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11).

On the surface, Jesus’ advice makes a lot of sense. Why risk the shame and embarrassment of having to give up your seat? Why not play it safe and take the worst seat with the chance of having your status visibly improved when the host grants you a better seat. Yet, Jesus’ suggestion challenges the typical status-seeking behaviour of guests at a first century dinner party. Reflecting on Jesus’ words, biblical scholar, Sylvia Keesmaat writes, “It is a strange parable of odd reversal: from now on your attitude at a banquet is to be the *least,* the lowest. In a social setting where rank – especially at a common meal – confirms one’s social status in the community, such advice would have been regarded as absolutely crazy. It would completely undermine one’s position in the community” (*The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables,* p. 272).

Instead of seeking prestige and honour, *humility* is to be the predominate value of Christ’s followers*.* Throughout his ministry, Jesus stressed this idea: “So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last” (Matthew 20:16) or “The greatest among you must be a servant.But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12). Finally, Jesus’ life and mission exemplified humility, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

 After addressing the party guests, Jesus turned to the host, the ruler of the Pharisees, and tackled another accepted social value that affected who was on the guest list (Luke 14:12-14). This important social value was *reciprocity,* which is the idea that if someone gives you something, you are obligated to repay him or her in some way. In the context of a dinner invitation, it means that when you are invited for a meal, you are expected to extend an invitation to your host in the future. The tendency, then, was for people to invite only those who were able to offer recompense, such as *friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours* (14:12). Jesus aimed at the very heart of this social practice when he told his audience to *not* invite these people to lunch or dinner because they are the ones who are able to reciprocate and invite you to dinner. Instead, Jesus encouraged his listeners to extend table fellowship to those who were unable to reciprocate, namely, the *poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind* (14:13-14). None of the people in this group would have had the means to have someone over for dinner; it is likely that they barely had enough to feed themselves. In a world without a social safety net, the disabled would have been reduced to begging to get enough to live. Inviting these folks to a dinner party would defy the practice of reciprocity, yet Jesus assured his listeners that ultimately, God will repay them at the resurrection of righteous for their openhearted hospitality (14:14).

 Not only did Jesus’ words challenge the idea of reciprocity, they also confronted the notions of clean and unclean within Jewish culture. For his host, the ruler of the Pharisees, this would have very difficult to accept. The Pharisees were a group of first century Jews who attempted to enact holiness in the nation by keeping the laws of purity, which would have been especially pertinent to table fellowship. According to Leviticus 21:16-20, anyone with a “defect,” a blind, lame, disfigured or deformed person, could not present an offering to God. Such attitudes persisted in Jesus’ day. For example, the Jews at Qumran, the keepers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, excluded the blind, the lame and the crippled form their community meals (*1Q Sam 2:5-6*). So from the perspective of the Pharisee, inviting these people to a meal was not only a breach of etiquette, but also a serious threat to purity.

 Jesus’ words encourage us to practice *openhearted* and *open-handed* *hospitality* - to invite people to dinner who could never repay us and to extend table fellowship to people who may not fit our definitions of purity or propriety. Pride causes us to draw boundaries in our social world, restricting our associations to those who fit our definition of proper people. We need to be humble enough to share a meal with those who are on the fringes of society. Each one of needs to consider the social conventions, fears, prejudices and personal hang-ups that keep us from practicing this kind of radical hospitality. Each one of us needs to reflect on the implications of Jesus’ words as we draw up the guest list for our next dinner party.

**3. The Kingdom is like a Great Banquet**

As Jesus concluded his discourse on dinner parties, he mentions God’s reward at “the resurrection of the righteous” (14:14), which prompts one of his listeners to remark, “What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God!” (14:15). Contemplating his statement about Kingdom of God, Jesus tells a story about a man giving a great feast. The man plans a large dinner party and invites many people (14:16). When the time for the dinner arrives, he sends out his servant to bid those invited to come for the feast is ready (14:17). But all of them give reasons for not being able to attend (14:18-20). For three of those invited business, work and relationships took priority over attending the dinner party. The servant returns and tells the bad news to his master. While the master is angered by this turn of events, he does not abandon hope. “Go to the streets and alleys of the town,” he tells his servant, “And invite *the* *poor*, *the crippled, the blind and the lame*” (14:21). Interestingly enough, these are the same folks that Jesus urged his listeners to invite to their dinner parties earlier in the passage (14:13). With more room left at the table the master commands his servant, “Go outside the walls of the town, to the pathways and hedges and urge whomever you find to come because I want my house to be filled” (14:23). This is what the Kingdom of God is like. It is a feast where the Master pulls out all the stops to ensure that his house is filled. The Kingdom of God is a dinner party where no one is excluded because they are sick, or broken, or unworthy, or poor. Even those who are outside the walls, sleeping in the ditches by the roadside, receive an invitation to the party. Those folks, ignored, disposable and excluded in the first century world, were the guest of honour in the Kingdom of God.

 Jesus parable offers a number of challenges for the listener. God has invited you to his dinner party, have you responded? Or have you declined his offer with a list of excuses? Or do you feel unworthy to attend the feast? God extends his invitation to all people. He wants his house to be filled so all are welcome at this great feast. Stop making excuses and say “Yes,” to God.

 For God’s servants, the challenge is to welcome others to the Kingdom and to share this abundant feast with them. It may mean going out of our comfort zone, outside the walls to the highways and byways to gather people into the Master’s house. It may mean sharing a pew, a meal, or a cup of coffee with someone who doesn’t fit within our well-defined social circle. It may mean being humble enough to see that God loves and values people that we think are unlovable. It may mean practicing openhearted and open-handed hospitality with the disposable people in our world. While all this sounds a bit scary, we need to remember that we were once outside the walls in a very sad state and the Master invited us in from the cold and gave a seat at his table. Should we not extend similar hospitality to others beyond the walls?