

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 28, 2022

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Ecclesiasticus 10:12-18; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Jesus, the Problematic Dinner Guest

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There's a parlor game
A getting-to-know-you kind of social icebreaker sort of game
(I'm sure many of you've played it)
That's usually called some variation of
Who Would You Invite to Dinner.
Who Would You Invite to Dinner.
You're allowed to choose about six people, living or dead
Anyone who is or has ever been
That you'd invite to a dinner party.
And the answers are usually interesting and revealing,
Often because a person will make their choices self-consciously:
They know their guest list will be seen as a reflection of their own values and desires.
So they're eager to manage other people's perceptions of them.
Inviting Gandhi will say one thing. Inviting Nietzsche will say another.
In Christian circles, it's almost inevitably the case
That Jesus will show up somewhere on any given person's guest list.
Of course you'd invite Jesus. Obviously you'd invite Jesus.
There's usually no second thought.
But scripture keeps giving us these little hints
That Jesus might actually be an extravagantly problematic dinner guest.
That just when we think we have him on board
To help us shore up our own notions of our virtue, piety or religiosity
(He's on the guest list, after all, doesn't that say something good about us?)
Jesus will show up and figure out a way of turning the tables on us
Of subverting or upending our expectations
And what we thought was going to be a pleasant evening with friends
Turns out to be a ridiculous social disaster.

It's no wonder, then,
That the guests at the Sabbath meal in our reading from Luke this morning
"Watched him"—the Greek is a little stronger: they "observed him scrupulously" —
Anxious to see: what is he going to do?

Now a first-century dinner party was already the occasion for some anxiety.
A banquet like this
Was not just an opportunity to have some friends over for a lovely evening on the Sabbath
It was a carefully orchestrated display of social status
Attending such a dinner, you'd be expected to come up with
An estimation of your own social standing
Relative to all the other people in the room
And then take the place at the table
That accurately indicated that standing and status.
If you estimated wrongly,
Your host would have to ask you
To move to a place of lesser status
And make room for the more eminent guest.
And that would be a very public,
Very embarrassing,
Potentially very shameful
Demotion: social disaster.
So you had to get it right.
The guests might have been watching Jesus closely,
But they were watching each other too,
Wondering to themselves: whom do I outrank here?
Who might think they're better than I am here?
Banquets and dinner parties these days aren't much better off,
Let's be honest.

Now let's remember one more thing about this supper in Luke.
It's a Sabbath supper.
It's supposed to be a time of rest, renewal,
Not anxiety, not power games and the subtle violence of social machinations.
It's supposed to be a way to connect to the wholeness that God has always desired for us.
The first century Rabbi Akiva writes that
The Sabbath is nothing less than a foretaste of the "world to come"
And Jesus himself emphasizes the eschatological dimensions of the Sabbath
When he evokes the image of a wedding banquet, a well-known prophetic image
Of the consummation of all things on the last day.
This supper in Luke is supposed to mirror
The blessedness of God's promise of redemption and restoration.
Needless to say, if we imagine that the Sabbath, the world to come,
Looks anything like the viciousness of sinful human social structures
Then we don't understand the Sabbath.
But then again, let's be honest.
We *don't* understand the Sabbath.
Our way of understanding the world and our relationship to it
Is so conditioned by violence, death, sin
That it really is hard to imagine
That God has nothing to do with any of that
Nothing to do with jockeying for prestige, "us against them," anxiety over status.
Hard to imagine that when God desires rest for us
God is desiring God's own life of peace for us,
A peace not as the world gives, but that passes understanding.

It's that peace that Jesus embodies at this supper in Luke.

Our Gosseller tells us that Jesus notices
How the other guests chose the chief rooms, the places of honor
Notices their anxiety over social position and esteem.
He knows they're watching him and watching each other, too.
And he has compassion on them. On us.
He offers an alternative way of being and relating
That is so radically different from what we've come to expect
From the "normal" world of human interaction.
Here it is:
You'd be better off, Jesus says if, when you're invited somewhere, to "go and sit down in the lowest room,
that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher."
But Jesus isn't just offering an alternative to
Potentially awkward social interactions that might complicate a banquet.
He's demanding something that looks like a radical act of faith.
Because what he's suggesting here would have looked like a big risk to his audience:
There's a risk that in taking the lower seat at the feast, you might stay there.
But...
If you can manage to trust the friend who invites you
If you can manage to have faith in your relationship with your friend,
Any seat, even the lowest seat, is perfectly fine,
Because you know your friend
Who loves you
Will bring you to where you need to be.
And that, Jesus seems to suggest, is Sabbath.

What he's saying to the guests and to us, is this:
"What if you were to relax for just a moment.
What if you were to loosen your grip, just a little bit,
On this honor and prestige shell game that has you so wound up.
You don't need to play it. Let it go.
What if you were to imagine for a moment
That you are actually loved.
That you are actually fundamentally and completely lovable
And that this love is freely and gratuitously and excessively and abundantly given to you.
Constantly. It never ends. It never runs out.
And it's given to you not because you earned it.
Not because of anything you did or didn't do.
But because there has never been a time when the One who loves you didn't love you:
That's just who this One is.
Imagine that you were going to make the choice to receive this love
To accept the invitation this love has given you
To live your life absorbed in love.
Imagine that, in the light of this love, you were to realize
That everyone else around you is loved, too.
That everyone else is also completely and fundamentally lovable.
Imagine what it would be like to love them with the love that loves you.
To invite them into that love.
Think how your life would change.
How your priorities might shift.
How your world might be transformed.
Because this hunger for power, for honor, for glory,
At other people's expense

Has gotten you upside down and backwards.
But the love that's given you,
The love that shaped the world from nothing,
That made you and is you in a way more mysterious than you can ever imagine,
That love is waiting for you to let go of everything that is not love,
So that it can finally take your open hand and say:
'Friend, move up higher.'"

And then, Jesus goes further.

And you can imagine him turning to his host at some point
with a look of sheer uncontainable delight on his face, and saying:

"Also: I have the best idea in the world! The next time you give a dinner party, don't invite your friends.
Right? Don't invite your family...or wealthy influential folks, in fact, don't do anything so you can get your
own dinner invite or do some networking. No no no! Here's the thing. The next time you give a banquet,
invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the pariah, the outcast, the downtrodden, the alien, the outsider, invite
anyone you think can't really do anything for you. Can you think of anything more gratuitously joyful?
Imagine how big your table would need to be! But look, if you're worried, remember this: I'm a carpenter
by trade, and I myself will build that table for you."

I doubt the suggestion, went over very well.

Again: Jesus is asking his host to take a risk

To put his sense of honor

His sense of self on the line

To invite social disaster for the good of others.

To his host, what Jesus is suggesting looks like ruin.

But Jesus' words evoke both the character of Sabbath

And the character of the Incarnation

Because the giddy secret is: Jesus is telling us about the nature of God, here.

Jesus' words to his host aren't just a suggestion on how to do something lovely

By potentially rehabilitating the social honor of one's "less-fortunate" neighbors

Jesus' words are a revelation of what he's actually doing in the world

And they're an invitation for us to do likewise.

It's as if Jesus is saying: "You're watching me closely? Good! Now:

Do as I do! Mirror my life! Live the Sabbath!"

He's not talking about a grand one-off act of philanthropy or charity

Nor a reasonable long-term charitable giving plan.

He's talking about

What it means

To change our lives

To live a life in response to the gratuitous and overwhelming grace of God

A grace that cannot be repaid, only accepted.

He's talking about what it looks like to live away from self

Toward the Outsider. The Other. The Outcast.

Not because we may thereby entertain an angel unawares

But because they are, they must be, Christ to us.

Jesus is making this suggestion to set a banquet for the Outsider

Because his own life, death, resurrection and ascension are all about

Preparing a banquet for those who,

Bound by sin and death and violence

And *captive* to the world's reckoning of things

Were outsiders to grace, outsiders to love: all of us, in other words.

Jesus set aside his own divine honor, glory, power and prestige

Set aside his own high throne in heaven
To assume our fallen humanity, to sit in the lowest place, our place.
And after we rejected his love,
After he suffered on the cross
The accumulated disaster, the wreck and ruin of *our* sinfulness
He rose again, Love triumphant over vengeance, violence, and death,
And he rose not to punish but to forgive, to fiercely love, and to invite.
And even now he reaches out his nail-scarred hands to us
Saying:
“I’ve invited you to a great banquet.
I’ve given you my own seat at the table.
My Friend, My Love: move up higher.”

It’s a risky proposition to invite Jesus to dinner:
What we thought of as honor and social status and glory
He will reveal to us as meaningless posturing.
But if we keep our eyes on Jesus
If we watch him closely
We’ll see something remarkable.
As our certainties buckle
As our former sense of self, conditioned by death and violence, collapses
As the formerly anxious world seems to spin upside down and every which way
It’ll be hard to miss the cruciform shape of our social disaster.
Hard, in other words,
Not to realize that this was the most wonderful thing that could’ve ever happened to us.
Hard not to notice that we have become the guests
And Jesus has mysteriously become both our host and our feast
Our Bread and our Wine
At a table somehow wide enough for more than we ever thought possible,
Saying as he places in our hands the Bread Heaven
As he invites us to partake of his own divine life:
This is my Body broken for you
Watch me! Now you:
Yes you.
Do This Also.
--To Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever, be all honor, glory, dominion and power with the
Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost, world without end. Amen.