

We Choose Welcome

Hebrews 13:1-6; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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The social stakes are always high at mealtime, and perhaps nowhere is that more obvious than the school cafeteria. In my elementary school, the rule was that our class had to file into the cafeteria in line and fill the seats in order, which meant there was always a clamor about *getting* in line, to make sure you'd get to sit next to your friends. To complicate the process, there were only 8 seats on each side of the table, so you had to count off the line and make sure you weren't number 9 in line, because if you were 9 and your friend was 8, it was bad news for you—you were going to end up starting a new row at the other end. Now fast forward to the college cafeteria. In college, we of course chose any seat we wanted, but there was still an art to getting a good spot; the worst was when you went to dinner with an odd-numbered group of friends and ended up as the odd person out, stuck on the end across from no one, missing the whole conversation.

Now according to a humorous piece floating around the internet, this dance continues past the school cafeteria into adulthood. “You might think a successful dinner party is determined by the food or the wine,” the piece goes, “but it’s not: it’s all about the seat.”¹ “How many times have you been invited to a dinner only to spend the night stuck talking to the *most boring person* in the room?”² The solution, according to this article, is to select your seat carefully, with a handy graphic designed to help you think through all the various table shapes and scenarios, which seat gives you the most potential for good conversation at each type of table, and how to time your approach just right.³ The key is to let a few people sit down first, so get a sense of how the seating is beginning to shake out. But if you wait too long, you could find yourself on the end or, in a multi-table scenario, at the boring table.

The seating arrangements and dinner guests had their own kind of social significance in Jesus' time. Sabbath dinners and banquets were influenced by the Greco-Roman symposium, which meant that the seating was arranged in a U-shape, with the host at the center of the U; the coveted seats were at the center with the host, and the lowest positions were flung to the ends, with less access to the host and most likely less access to the conversation.⁴ Besides the practicalities of wanting to be in the center of the room, there was also the question of honor—shared meals were an important place for developing and displaying your social status, hard to do if you got the low seat. Not only where you sat but *who you ate with* was a huge deal, because eating together forged a kind of social connection that made a statement.⁵ This is why Jesus was criticized for eating with “sinners”; this is why later, Peter would be criticized for eating with Gentiles. And we know that in at least some religious sects in the first century, Jews were strictly

¹ “How to Get the Best Seat at Dinner,” *Huffington Post*, last modified Dec 7, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dining-etiquette-seating_n_2949577.

² *Ibid.*

³ Alex Cornell, “Choosing the Right Seat,” <http://files.alexcornell.com/alexcornell-musicalchairs.jpg>.

⁴ Thomas Long, Luke Powery, Joel B. Green, and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: Year C, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 282.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 102-103.

forbidden to let in the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, for they were seen as impure and unfit.⁶

All of this is at play as Jesus begins to observe the dinner guests at the Pharisee's house. Jesus sees guests clamoring for the center seats, and he calls them out. Don't do that, he says. Instead, *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.* His teaching here echoes a proverb that would have been familiar to the Pharisees in attendance at this dinner. *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, the proverb goes, for it is better to be told 'Come up here' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*⁷

But while the proverb might be understood as a shrewd way to beat the system and be honored, Jesus is not advocating false humility as a path to getting the best seat. The way of Jesus goes further, and collapses the whole system. In Jesus' retelling, the one who tries to sit too high is not moved just a little lower, but all the way to the lowest seat. In Jesus' retelling, the lowest becomes the highest, the first is last and the last is first, the humble are exalted in this parable. This is bigger than a dinner party—this is about the kingdom of God, where all social customs are turned upside down and all, no matter their position, are of great value to God.

Jesus has now made everyone a little uncomfortable, and he goes on to address his host. (Side note: next time you get invited to a nice dinner, I do not recommend publicly calling out the host in front of the whole party, lambasting him for inviting the wrong crowd.) *When you throw a party, Jesus says, don't invite your friends. Invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, the blind. Invite the people who might sabotage your social standing and make you look bad, because they are people too. Invite the people who are excluded by your community because they are deemed unfit, impure.*

Now, based on the amount of time Jesus spent at parties, and the amount of time Jesus spent hanging out with the same twelve disciples he called his friends, I don't think Jesus is saying that we should never spend time with people we enjoy. Rather, Jesus is pointing out something that's just as true in the 21st century as in the 1st. That we are so quick to choose our social counterparts, our companions, our friends, our guests—by the hope of what they can offer us. In social situations, we want to sit near the cool people so that we can be cool by association, so that we can gain access to their connections, so that we can be entertained by their humor and stories. We want to invite our friends and relatives to our parties; we want to invite rich people or just people we think are interesting, good potential friends. In the business world, we seek the ear of the boss, a place at the table with those who have influence.

Of course, it's complicated. Very rarely do most of us have *conscious* designs of “exalting ourselves” by the way we interact. Wanting to connect with someone you find interesting is not a selfish desire. Wanting to honor your friends and relatives with a dinner invitation isn't a scheme to get power. It's a way of building long-term friendships that are full of give and take and love and support, the kind of friendships that can empower one another to be loving people, fellow disciples of Jesus.

⁶ 1QSa 2:3-8

⁷ Proverbs 25:6-7.

But many of us *have* declined an invitation by the person we find annoying or a little needy, yet somehow found time for our cool best friend with the nice beach house. Or maybe we've tried to avoid bringing our awkward, embarrassing uncle into the same gathering with the people we want to impress. Or maybe we have sought friends for our children among the smart and rich and beautiful. Along the way, how many people in our lives have we simply overlooked, because they don't fit into our concept of a friend, of a good connection, of a worthy person to know.

This strategy of seeking out social connections may get us repaid. But the way of Jesus offers something even better than repayment. The way of Jesus offers *blessing*, and not only in a future resurrection timeline but right now, too, because it offers a glimpse of the kingdom of God. The way of Jesus offers the potential of entertaining angels unawares.

Because if you sit at the end of the table where the lowliest, weirdest, “most boring” guests are, you might find that God is there. If you host a meal or a party and welcome the people deemed unfit—not just hand them a lunch sack or write a check to their organization but sit down and eat together—you might see how beloved and wonderful they are, and remember your own belovedness.

Jean Vanier, a French-Canadian Catholic theologian, discovered this blessing almost by accident. As a young man in 1963, he was moved by a visit to an institution for people with intellectual disabilities; so he decided to invite two disabled men to live with him outside Paris.⁸ That experience changed him deeply. He had been a philosophy professor who lived from his head, his mind, his sense of duty; “They brought out the child in me,” he said. “I began to live from my heart.”⁹ Vanier brought into his home those the world says are unfit, unworthy. And in doing so, he found blessing. He found a bit of the kingdom of God.

Vanier spent the rest of his life living in community with people with disabilities, until his death at age 90 earlier this year. Out of Vanier's personal transformation, the L'Arche organization was born. There are now 154 L'Arche communities throughout the world, including one here in D.C., where people with and without intellectual disabilities live in community together, eat together, celebrate together. No one in the community gets a seat of honor. Those with and without disabilities have tasks in the home. Those with and without disabilities celebrate birthdays together. Those with and without disabilities learn from one another.

Vanier described the power of this kind of community: “When those ingrained in a culture of winning and individual success really meet [people with intellectual disabilities] and enter into friendship with them” he said, “something amazing and wonderful happens. They are changed at a very deep level. They are transformed and become truly human.”¹⁰ It's no surprise to me that those who are caught in a culture of winning and success and vying for the best seat and inviting the powerful to their tables—that these people can encounter God deeply by giving up that game and living another way. In Jesus' parable, did you notice who is called blessed? It's not those poor humble people who are offered a better seat. It's not those poor crippled and lame people who are offered a place at the banquet. No, they were always blessed. But it's the privileged who

⁸ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Jean Vanier, Savior of People on the Margins, Dies at 90,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/obituaries/jean-vanier-dead.html>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

move to the lowest seat who will be newly blessed. It's the rich host who makes a banquet full of misfits who will be newly blessed.

I've experienced this blessing through the way of Jesus time after time after time. When I studied and worked in a women's prison, with those the world says are unfit, I experienced a level of spiritual depth that moves me to this day. When I got thrown into what seemed to be the boring side of the metaphorical dinner table—into a year-long internship with a group of weirdos I was convinced would never be friends—I instead made dear friends, whose wisdom and love spoke into every vulnerable place in my soul.

And I don't think this blessing is at all a coincidence. When we live in the upside-down way of Jesus, when we see how the last are first and the humble are exalted, when we encounter all the misfits of the world as beloved children of God... that also reminds us that the lowly, humble, misfit, uncool parts of ourselves are beloved and valued and welcome. And so through that encounter, we are liberated. We don't have to pretend. We don't have to dress to impress. We don't have to think about image. All those parts of ourselves that we work so hard to keep up, those exalted parts will be humbled, will be unimportant. We can be our real, vulnerable selves. The one who is awkward at making small talk. The one who has skeletons in the closet. The one who wrestles with depression or with doubt or with alcohol use or with how to fit in with family. All those parts of us are welcome at the party of the kingdom of God, where the humble are exalted and shown how utterly loved we are.

This isn't just some far-off vision of the life of the world to come. The kingdom of God is among us, if we live into it.

How many times have I missed the opportunity to live into it, because I have had my own mind set about who would be the table conversation partner, about who would be the best group to invite to sit with me in the cafeteria, to have over for dinner, to welcome in my church? Because I held on to my pursuit of the place of honor, success, popularity, comfort, instead of opening wide the doors for the humble?

Our church sign out there says, "We Choose Welcome." I love it, because it reminds us that our role as followers of Jesus is not to choose the best guests, or the best seats, or the people we think are perfect for our congregation—people who look like us, people who have a bunch of kids to carry on our legacy, people who have money to shore up our budget. Our role is to choose welcome, regardless of who walks in. Our role is to choose welcome. To reach out especially to those who wouldn't expect to be welcomed into a church. To save a seat next to us at the potluck for someone we don't think we have anything in common with. To make a space in our individual lives and in our church community for those the world says are unfit—people with disabilities, people who have been in prison, people with addictions...you fill in the blank. To be vulnerable with one another, not pretending to our ideal best selves but bringing all our mess into community, modeling how our imperfections are welcome in the kingdom of God.

This is what it is to choose welcome. And as we will remember and enact together in just a few moments, this is what it is to gather with all the lowly and weird and unfit and unworthy, by mercy and grace, at the table of Jesus Christ.