

Sermon
Evan Hierholzer
Church of Reconciliation
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Good morning. It is good to be with you today, and, as always, an honor to preach among you.

After much thought, consideration, and prayer, I was about to title my sermon for today: “Why Jesus is Always Bound to Ruin a Good Dinner Party.” I also considered the title: “Jesus: The Worst Dinner Guest Ever.” Now this might strike you as strange—after all, from a certain point of view, Jesus could be also considered the best possible person to invite to a party—especially with that whole ability to turn water into wine and all. But in today’s Gospel text, Jesus is a particularly feisty guest—not only does he rather overtly criticize the other guests for trying to get the best seats in the house, but he also calls out the person who invited him in front of the entire group—essentially telling the host, that he invited all the wrong people for all the wrong reasons. If that isn’t a way of ensuring that you will never be invited back, I don’t know what is. I started to wonder if Jesus is like that one proverbial uncle at the Thanksgiving dinner table whose political opinions and off-putting jokes always makes everyone else just a bit uncomfortable.

But I don’t think it’s as simple as that—I don’t think that Jesus stirred up trouble just for fun, or merely to ruffle feathers and make people uneasy. But why is it then that Jesus feels the need to ruin a good dinner party? What exactly is at stake at this meal?

Let’s take a closer look at the text and see what is at the heart of Jesus’ criticisms, and why someone with priorities like Jesus may have been bound to upset the traditional social events of his time.

Now to be fair to Jesus, the dinner is already NOT off to a great start in the first verse: Jesus appears to have been invited to the meal, but the lawyers and Pharisees are already “watching him closely.” That’s not a good thing. Nothing sets the tone for a pleasant and enjoyable evening like all the guests closely scrutinizing your every move and every bite. But Jesus is not only BEING observed—he is making some observations himself—Jesus notices that folks have their eye on the best seats in the house, the places of honor. I would imagine that as Jesus sits and watches this social game of courting power and prestige, he is reminded of a proverb out of his beloved Hebrew Scriptures: Proverbs 25:6-7: “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.” At this point, Jesus’ critique of his fellow guests appears to be nothing more than proverbial wisdom—in a culture in which honor and shame were paramount, Jesus advice here would have struck a chord.

But there seems to be more at stake here than just traditional social wisdom—verses 12-14 of the Gospel make clear that there is a deeper critique—when Jesus turns on his host and declares that instead of the rich and powerful, instead of the familiar and comfortable, one should invite the poor, lame, and blind, Jesus is criticizing our endless ways of seeking after honor, incentive, and profit, rather than offering true hospitality. At the heart of this text is how we relate to power and prestige—do we assign ultimate value to power? Do we assume that power equals righteousness? And when we do engage in hospitality or reach out to others, is it so that our social image is thereby improved in the eyes of others, or so that we might be rewarded down the road? If Jesus is critical of the social hierarchy that privileges the powerful, the in-crowd, and the exclusively invited, then it is easy to see why Jesus might be a risky dinner

guest—his own vision of an inverted social order, where the first are last, and the last are first, is an implicit indictment of many of our social, political, and religious institutions.

If we again turn to the first verse of the gospel, you will notice that it says Jesus went “to eat a meal on the sabbath.” Literally, the text says, he “went to eat bread on the sabbath.” One way we might approach the gospel today is by comparing this occasion of breaking bread on the sabbath to our own breaking of bread on the sabbath, that is, in the Eucharistic meal just a few moments from now. How does the meal that Jesus was invited to compare to the meal that Jesus invites us to?

In the meal of the Gospel text, Jesus is indicting our way of distorting an opportunity for a communion meal into an opportunistic chance to reinforce hierarchy, and pursue a higher rung on the social ladder. What should be a time of thankful and open-handed giving, has become a shameless attempt to acquire and to take. Jesus criticizes any banquet that would incentivize inviting only the rich and powerful in order to reap long-term profit and social capital, and instead institutes a banquet that promises to feed those who are empty, downtrodden, and those who have absolutely nothing left to give in return, except their very selves. It is reassuring to know that our invitation to Jesus’ communal meal does not have any ulterior motives—all that is asked of us is our presence and our willingness to come and eat, not our ability to repay, to bestow wealth, or honor. Moreover, the Eucharist meal is an image of inclusion—the blind, the lame, those who are deemed “unproductive” by society and those who are unable to promise any social advancement, these are precisely the ones who must occupy the seats of honor in the Kingdom. These are precisely the ones whom Jesus invites and caters to at his communal table.

The reading this morning from Jeremiah also speaks of our tendency to seek out illusory profit. God speaks through Jeremiah saying that it is exactly the priests, lawyers, and rulers who

seek out profit that, ironically, profit nothing—for in seeking profit they have lost sight of God, and God's call to live justly among others—Instead of turning to the source of living water, they have dug their own broken, cracked cisterns—incapable of holding anything but always seeking more and more and never being filled. These are the same priests, lawyers and rulers, the social elite, whom Jesus calls out for prioritizing honor, profit and return, over open-hearted embrace, inclusion and disinterested charity.

This text may speak very different things to you today. Perhaps in Jeremiah and Jesus' words today, you hear a sober reminder of how much you yourself are subject to and complicit in a society which privileges the capable, the productive, and the profitable—perhaps you hear a call to reflect deeply on whom we choose to reach out to, and why. What might we do to disengage from and challenge a culture in which success and inclusion is predicated upon who we are, what we have, and who we know? Does our faith urge us to cling to power, or to release power, be vulnerable, and serve others for the sake of righteousness, and not profit? At times it pains me to reflect on how at work or elsewhere I may choose to spend more time with those who are like me, culturally, ethnically, or socio-economically, rather than risk reaching out to and spending time with those who are more difficult for me to relate to...those who I may not expect to personally reward me as much as others might.

On the other hand, perhaps this morning you find yourself among the ranks of the excluded and marginalized. Perhaps you find yourselves among those who could never hope to repay for an invitation to the banquet. Maybe you are exactly the kind of guest that Jesus invites to his own sabbath meal—depleted, burnt out by taking care of others or by work, searching for meaning, exhausted and fatigued, unable to give because there is nothing else to give—if this is the case, know that invitation into the Kingdom, invitation to the Thanksgiving meal, invitation

into the very Body of Christ is not contingent upon your ability to labor, to produce, and to pay back. You are invited to come, to share, to partake freely, to meet the Risen Christ and one another, and to be filled, to replenish, and to find wholeness and healing.

As I close, I would like to leave you with one more thought. I just finished Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*—it is a beautiful book, written as a series of reflections from an aging minister addressed to his young son. Among the many memorable lines from the book, one struck me particularly, when reflecting on this Gospel text. The narrator writes, “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense.” When we are caught up in our own honor, our protective need to be respected, repaid, and recognized, we lose sight of the divine—God does not emerge in the context of seeking our own profit and protecting our own privilege—God emerges when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, when we renounce our need to be first, to be esteemed, and to be compensated. As we prepare to come to the sabbath communion table, my prayer is that we may allow ourselves to encounter the God of grace, who mercifully liberates us from defending our own broken cisterns our own illusions of what is profitable, and whose unconditional, loving embrace assures us that even when we feel like we have nothing to offer, we are welcomed to come and to eat, and to find inspiration, renewal, and food for the journey.

AMEN