

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 14:1, 7-14

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This story is another story about Jesus teaching on his way up to Jerusalem. In this instance it is a story about a conversation that happens when Jesus is at the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. It was a Sabbath celebration and a big dinner because there are a significant number of guests. The issue is where to sit. The controversy is generated by Jesus when he observes guests vying for the best seats at the table.

The structure of this series of sayings is the setting followed by a parable. Jesus was eating a meal on the Sabbath and they were watching him closely. Then he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor and told them a parable.

The first parable consists of three episodes around the issues of where you sit at a banquet.

Episode 1: The first episode is what you should not do. Don't sit at the place of honor in case someone more distinguished comes.

Episode 2: The second part has the same structure but in this case the recommendation is sit down at the lowest place so that when your host comes, he may say friend move up higher.

Episode 3: The end of these recommendations about where to sit at a banquet is the point of this parable: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Episode 4: The fourth episode is a recommendation by Jesus to the host: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite...but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Once again the teaching in regard to this follows: "You'll be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The dynamics of this story are essentially very urbane. This is dinnertime conversation. These are the wise sayings of Jesus that he gives at dinners when everybody is gathered around the table reclining at a great banquet. There really isn't any major conflict. These are rather matters for reflection in light of the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus is teaching about that, as he virtually always is.

The parable here is indicative of what parables meant, that is many different kinds of wisdom sayings or *mashals*/comparisons. In this case the comparison is between appropriate behavior at a wedding banquet and inappropriate behavior in light of the

coming of the government of God in the world. The observation about what to do in relation to the places of honor at a wedding banquet is the parable about what will happen with the coming of the Kingdom; namely, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. The parable is the contrast between ways of behaving at a wedding banquet.

The second part of this story, that is the recommendations to the host about who to invite to dinner, is in a way another parable about what to do in relation to the coming of the Kingdom of God that is turned into a parable by the final observation, "You will be blessed because they cannot repay you. It will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The saying here is addressed to a group of Pharisees. It is restated as the teaching after the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Chapter 18. This saying is virtually repeated word for word in 18:14. The subject is an appropriate spirituality in relation to the kingdom of God. In the context of the Pharisaic communities of first century Judaism, as in Christian communities in the 21st century, an issue is using religion as a means of self glorification and power. Many people do this, then and now.

The dynamic of the interaction between religion and honor, of striving for honor and trying to move oneself up in the ranks of honor, either at work or in the context of religious communities, happens in virtually every institution. There are ongoing and indirect contests going on in regard to who will be higher in the rankings of the community. A basic message in relation to the kingdom of God is that those who participate in that kind of pursuit of honor in this evil age will be leveled. There will be a sorting of those who are humble and those who exalt themselves.

This great leveling actually happens in history. We look back on the kings and nobles and people who strove for power and often evaluate them as being among the worst of their contemporaries. So for example, in Luke's time, the Emperor was Domitian, the second son of Vespasian. He was probably the worst Emperor in the entire history of Rome. After he died, the Roman Senate issued a decree called the *Domnatio Memoriai*, in which all evidence of Domitian was to be eliminated from Rome. All his statues were torn down, every place where his name was inscribed was to be blotted out, all records of Domitian were to be eliminated. He was subjected to being humiliated in memory. Why? Because he more than probably any other Emperor tried to exalt himself and put himself in a position of power over other senators and over other emperors. He required people who came to him to address him as "my Lord and my God." He made himself a god so that people would literally worship him.

Domitian's damnation by his contemporaries is only a relatively grotesque example of something that happens over and over again throughout history; people who were regarded as humble and unimportant in their time are in retrospect seen as having been absolutely central and of great importance and value, while those who strove for power

are humiliated and are put in their place. This great leveling is something that Jesus talks about all the time. The first will be last and the last first. If this is the case in relation to the assessments that happen in human history, how much more will this be the case in relation to the great assessment that will come in light of the values of the kingdom of God.

In relation to personal spirituality a specific exercise is to ask yourself, "What are the things that I regard as being below me? What is too humble or demeaning for me to do? What am I too good to do?" By such self-examination you can identify where you place yourself in relation to the various hierarchies of value. This self-examination in relation to the dynamics of self-glorification versus humility is at its core something that each person has to do for him or herself.

In the second part of this story, Jesus' recommendation to the host is in fact a really hard saying. The idea that we should invite to dinner the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind is something that, as far as I can identify, almost nobody does in obedience to Jesus' teaching. In regard to this, the invitations to dinner among Christian communities are not significantly different than what happens in the rest of the society. We generally don't invite to our church dinners people who are poor or blind or lame. So this is an aspect of Jesus' way that we don't take seriously and have largely rejected. Some churches have feeding programs for poor folks, but not many individuals host parties for them.

A promise that Jesus makes in relation to this teaching is that those who pursue a practice of inviting the poor, the lame, the blind will be welcomed to the great banquets of the Kingdom of God and will be given places of honor. In the government of God, the poor, the blind and the lame are fed. Respect for the poor, those who have been impoverished, crippled, or blinded by things beyond their control is a sign of the kingdom of God.

There are agencies that the church has sponsored that care for people and support the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind. Hospitals that have been established by the Church often provide this kind of care. Unfortunately, many of the Church's hospitals have now been taken over by for-profit companies who have not continued this practice because such folks can't pay anything. Nevertheless, the clear mandate from Jesus' teaching is that a responsibility for everyone is to give gifts for which one cannot be repaid.

Jesus framed this responsibility as being an *opportunity* to be repaid for righteousness at the coming of the Kingdom of God. The concept of the resurrection of the righteous is the promise that a dimension of the full presence of the government of God in the world will be the resurrection of the righteous. That is the reward that is promised for those who would do actions such as hosting a banquet for the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.