

Title: The Guest List of God
8/31 Sermon – 12th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 112
Reading from the New Testament: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

SAY: Let us Pray

Prayer of Illumination:

Let us Pray -

Holy God, as we hear your Word read and proclaimed, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Spirit. Help us to listen, to understand, and to follow where you are leading. Amen.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 (NRSV)

14 On one occasion when Jesus[a] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. **7** When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. **8** “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host,**9** and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. **10** But when you are invited, 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. **11** For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. **13** But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. **14** And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon:

In our passage today, it's the Sabbath Day, and the scene is a dinner party at the home of a prominent Pharisee. This is not a casual backyard summer barbecue; rather, it is a formal banquet with religious and social elites. It is the kind of event where every detail matters. This meal is layered with meaning, status, and social politics, and into the middle of it comes Jesus.

The scene doesn't take place in the synagogue, where we might expect Jesus to be challenged, but in the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, who has invited Jesus to join him and his fellow scribes and Pharisees for a meal. Perhaps Jesus was invited so they could observe him carefully to see if he would break Sabbath traditions again. Or perhaps they were curious about this rabbi who taught with authority and welcomed sinners. Whatever the reason, Jesus attends.

The room was buzzing with energy as the guests took their seats. Jesus quietly watches what occurs. He watches how they scramble for the best seats, the seats of honor, the seats closest to the host, where honor and influence would have been the greatest. The tables would have been

arranged in a 'U' shape, called a triclinium. In Roman culture, your place at the table signaled your social importance. First-century Palestine, under Roman power and occupation, lived under a rigid class system where birth, wealth, position, and citizenship defined your worth. The most honored guests reclined closest to the host, while the least significant sat furthest away.

Because of this, the scribes and Pharisees were pushing and shoving, arguing over who sits in front of whom, and over who is more important than whom. When Jesus sees the Pharisees pushing and arguing for seats of influence, he sees more than just table etiquette. He sees a reflection of the human heart that includes our deep need for approval, power, prestige, and recognition. And in this human moment, Jesus speaks words that stop the room cold, that turns the entire dinner scene in an uncomfortable, unexpected direction. Jesus questions who is invited to the table and challenges hosts to expand their guest lists. He says in verse 11, “for everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). In that single sentence, Jesus flips the entire evening upside down. The mood shifts. People paused mid-bite and conversations stopped as what Jesus was saying was radical.

In that one sentence, Jesus flips the entire social system upside down. Jesus goes from talking about table seating strategies to talking about the Kingdom of God and in God’s kingdom, status doesn’t elevate you, humility does. The point is that God’s kingdom operates in a way that is radically different from the way the world works. He was trying to convey that **God’s kingdom doesn’t work like this**. It isn’t a place where you climb ladders of power, or where one’s worth is measured by title, wealth, or influence to get into the kingdom; rather, God’s kingdom has a completely different seating chart, an open, welcoming, and inclusive one.

Theologian N.T. Wright explains, “when Jesus talks about God’s kingdom, he is talking about the world being turned the right way up... which, from the world’s point of view, looks upside down.” What Jesus said in verse 11 is not just a reminder of correct manners, conduct, and behavior; rather, it’s a **reorientation of reality** according to the Gospel truth.

Jesus doesn’t stop by talking about true humility, which comes through God and seeing ourselves like God sees us, by seeing ourselves through God’s eyes and by the Light of God’s Word. Jesus even goes further than this. He turns to the host and delivers an even more shocking challenge in verses 12-13, and says: “when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid, but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Well, that comment would have landed like a thunderclap, like a fart in church, like wearing white to someone else’s wedding, like showing up to a black-tie gala in sweatpants, like accidentally hitting ‘reply all,’ like cheering for Duke in a room full of UNC fans, like sitting in someone else’s pew on a Sunday morning, like spilling your coffee on your white attire before church, and like accidentally FaceTiming our but-dialing someone at midnight. Meals in Jesus’ time were not just about food; rather, they were about community, identity, and belonging. Meals were central to Jesus’ ministry and served as windows into the very heart of God’s kingdom. All throughout scripture, we see Jesus teaching the most profound truths about grace, forgiveness, community, belonging, and transformation not from a pulpit but around a table, around a meal.

In the Gospel of Luke, meals, in particular, provide central settings for Jesus' mission and ministry. Luke's Gospel repeatedly shows Jesus using meals to reveal God's character and mission. He eats with tax collectors and sinners at Levi's banquet to demonstrate God's mercy (Luke 5:29–32), breaks bread with Simon the Pharisee while teaching about forgiveness (Luke 7:36–50), feeds the five thousand on a hillside with five loaves and two fish to reveal God's abundant provision (Luke 9:10–17), invites Himself to Zacchaeus' house to offer salvation (Luke 19:1–10), and shares the Last Supper with His disciples to establish the new covenant and redefine what it means to belong to God's family. (Luke 22:14–20). As biblical scholar Robert Karris famously writes, “in Luke's Gospel, Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate.” In other words, the table was not just where Jesus taught; rather, it was where Jesus embodied the kingdom, breaking down walls of status, hierarchy, and power, and revealing a God whose love makes room for everyone, whose guest list is open and inclusive of all people.

By telling the Pharisee to invite those who could never return the favor in verses 12–13, Jesus is dismantling an entire cultural system built on reciprocity, status, power, privilege, and exclusion. What Jesus envisions is a radically different kind of table — one where the marginalized are central, not peripheral, and a table not defined by social status, ranking, or power, but by grace. It's a table where God's grace writes the invitations, where belonging is a birthright due to being created in God's image, where love is freely poured out, and where the guest list stretches as wide as God's heart. At God's table, there's always room to pull up one more chair. God's guest list is always open.

This is the heart of God's kingdom: abundance instead of scarcity, generosity instead of competition, welcome instead of walls. The heart of God's kingdom is enough for everyone, love for anyone, and room for all. Theologian Henri Nouwen captures this beautifully, “hospitality is not about changing people, but about offering them space where change can take place,” and I think that's what Jesus strived to do and teach in this story.

Jesus was trying to offer and create a space where change occurred so that the Pharisees did not just continue to give priority and privilege to relationships with others closest to them. Rather, God wanted them and us to open ourselves up to others and begin to take a new look at each and every person through the lens of our belovedness as God's children. This is why Jesus says this to the host, “Next time, do not just invite the people the world considers important; rather, invite the people who really need to feel the love of God through you, your love, because they are children of God just like you.” His teachings in this story offers us a glimpse of God's ultimate invitation — a vision of a kingdom where everyone has a seat and there's always room to pull up one more chair. As theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us: “The church is the church only when it exists for others... not dominating, but helping and serving.”

This quote raises challenging questions for us today: Who sits at our tables — in our homes, our churches, and our communities? Who have we left out of our invitations, whether intentionally or unintentionally? Are our relationships built on mutual benefit, or are they rooted in God's grace that is freely given and expects nothing in return? Who would we never expect to see at

God's table — and what if God gives them the seat of honor or what if we give them the seat of honor?

At the heart of this passage is Jesus' radical insistence that every person bears the image of God, and God's guest list is always open. Those the world marginalizes, forgets, or dismisses, God calls beloved. Therefore, God's table consists of tables, spaces, and communities where mercy sets the place cards, grace breaks the bread, love fills the cup, and God keeps adding names to the guest list without end. This is why Jesus ties this teaching from Luke 14 to the two greatest commandments, which say: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). True discipleship is not simply believing in Jesus; rather, it entails living like Jesus and following in Jesus' ways and teachings. It means opening our tables, widening our circles, and treating every person as a beloved child of God. That's what true and faithful Christian discipleship is all about - love, unconditional love.

It is around the table that Jesus shows us what God's kingdom looks like and he calls us to set our own tables accordingly. This question, "Who Gets a Seat at the Table?" isn't just about ancient Pharisee banquets; rather, it is for us too! It's about our everyday lives. As a youth pastor, I've seen how this plays out most vividly in the schools of our children and youth. Youth tell me that lunchtime are some of the most stressful, anxiety producing times for them as they choose who they are going to sit with or receive their schedules and realize none of their friends have the same lunch period as them. Imagine you walk into the cafeteria, tray in hand, scanning the room, trying to gauge where your friends are sitting or at least where people who look friendly might be. That raises the question: why do we gravitate toward certain tables, certain people? What happens when you cannot figure out your place or have none of your friends in your lunch period? What do you do then? What happens if you choose to sit somewhere else? What if you sit with people who are higher up the social ladder than you see yourself to be, or lower on the social ladder?

What would it mean for a youth or yourself to purposefully pick a less desirable table, to refuse to care about popularity, to dismantle the unspoken hierarchy? It might feel risky and you might lose social ranking, and people might question why you would choose to sit there. Yet this is exactly the tension Jesus speaks about in Luke 14. He challenges us to choose the lower seat, to give honor to others rather than grasping for it ourselves.

But oftentimes, we gravitate toward the people we know, the ones who look and think like us, and without meaning to, we can leave others standing on the margins, unsure of where they belong. What happens when we start paying attention to who is not at the table, or who is sitting alone?

Jesus' challenge in Luke 14 is to expand the table, literally and metaphorically, so that no one is excluded, no one remains unseen, and no one is unwelcomed.

It is here in Luke 14 that Jesus invites us to embody the hospitality of the kingdom by opening our tables/ homes, widening our circles, and treating every person as a beloved child of God.

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, *"Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."*

When we think about God's table in this way, we see that Jesus is calling us to beloved community. Our stewardship theme, which is "Created for Community" and based upon **1 John 4:7** that says, *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God"* also supports this. It helps us further understand what it means to be called by God into community — to belong, to love, to forgive, to serve, and to grow in faith alongside one another.

Friends, God's kingdom is not a table where we fight for the best seats. It is a feast where there is always enough, where everyone belongs, and where grace abounds. God's table challenges us to live differently — to welcome all, to love expansively, and to embody a Kingdom that is inclusive, radical, gracious and accepting of all. Our faith calls us to be people who not only accept God's invitation but also **invite others to the table**, creating spaces where no one is overlooked, no one is forgotten, and everyone has a place.

The banquet is ready. The invitations have gone out. The only question which remains is this: Who are we inviting to sit beside us at the table? According to Jesus, this must include everyone. But the more urgent question is: are we willing to make room for all God's people, even when it costs us something? Are we willing to sit somewhere different, invite someone new, and let go of our own place for the sake of someone else's belonging? This is the radical invitation of Luke 14, and it begins not just with our words, but with where, and with whom we choose to sit. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now, beloved children of God,
to the tables God has set before you.
Go where seats are empty,
where the overlooked and forgotten wait to be seen.
Go with the humility of Christ,
who chose the lowest place and lifted others higher.
Go with the courage to invite those
the world too often leaves out —
the lonely, the hurting, the stranger, the friend.

For at God's table,
there is always enough.
At God's table,
there is no higher or lower place.
At God's table,
you are loved, you are welcomed, and you belong.

So go, in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit,
to love God, love your neighbor,
and make room for everyone at the table.

Amen.

Go now, beloved, to the places where seats are empty and hearts are waiting.
Sit with humility, invite with courage, and love without measure.
Lift up the overlooked, the forgotten, and the stranger,
for at God's table there is enough for all, and all belong.
Go in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
to make room, share grace, and embody the kingdom of God.

Amen.

Go now, and take a seat where no one expects you.
Sit with courage, reach out with love, and invite the overlooked.
Break down walls, ignore the social ladder, and make room for everyone.
At God's table, there is always enough — and everyone belongs.
Go in Christ's name, and live the upside-down kingdom today.

Go forth in the love of God,
to the tables where grace is needed most.
Honor the lowly, embrace the stranger, and welcome the forgotten.
Remember, God's kingdom is a feast for all — there is room, there is hope, there is life.
Go in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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Amen