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Invited to a Banquet (Luke 14: 7-14)

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Jesus has been invited to dinner. It's at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, and it's on the Sabbath day. Just prior to our passage there's been a predictable skirmish – a man in need of healing has emerged from nowhere – 'Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy', writes Luke. The lawyers and Pharisees, of course, 'were watching Jesus closely' (14: 1), but declined to answer when he asked: 'is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?' So Jesus cured the man, and sent him on his way. According to Luke, he then passes some remarks about how to conduct oneself as a guest, and how hosts should approach their guest list. Except it's not really just about dinner. 'In these sayings', writes one commentator, which are 'loosely connected to the topic of festive dining ... the Lucan Jesus offers indirect counsel to his disciples about modes of conduct toward other human beings'.¹ I'm interested in the nature of this counsel.

It's possible to read the first part of Jesus' advice as straight-out prudential – a proverbial, 'don't count your chickens' kind of story. When you're invited by someone to a wedding banquet, don't sit in a place of honour, in case it's reserved for someone more distinguished than you. The danger of such presumption is you might be asked to move down the line, and so be disgraced in front of everyone – your lowlier status now explicitly revealed. Conversely, if you put yourself in the lowest place, there's always a chance that you'll be elevated and so 'honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you' (14: 10). Clearly, in an honour-shame culture, this looks like a sound piece of worldly advice, but it hardly seems like divine revelation.

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Double Day & Company Inc., 1985), p.1045.

In fact, it has a slightly grubby, manipulative flavor. What I really want is to look good in front of my peers, but it turns out the best way to go about this is to enact a kind of modest, self-effacement. In effect on this reading, writes biblical scholar I. Howard Marshall, ‘blatant seeking for prestige, which can lead to dishonour, should be replaced by a more cunning approach which will result in greater honour’.² I am reminded of clergy processions I’ve been part of, with everyone jostling to be at the end of the line – ostensibly humbled and so (in the inverse logic of the gospel) exalted.

The same kind of underhandedness can seem to be encouraged by Jesus’ words to those who are hosts. If you want to be rewarded for your hospitality, then the real way to go about it is not to invite those who can invite you back, but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. *They* cannot pay you back, but you will nevertheless be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous – and the implication is, with a much bigger reward because the giver is God.

Clearly the problem with this kind of reading and that, while the tactics are inverted, the underlying and worldly dynamic is unchanged. You want honour, you want reward – fine – here’s the way you do it, practice false modesty and ‘do-goodery’. All too often, alas, this is what Christian culture can feel like – a bit phony and self-consciously patronising.

I can’t believe this is what Jesus is really on about. Yes – at one level, the stories can be read as simply inverting the usual ways of securing our identity and belonging. At a deeper level, though, surely they’re about transforming the fundamental dynamics of our relationship to these things. It seems to me that Jesus is seeking to shift us into a whole different way of being, so that we experience our own lives and our being with others in a profoundly new way. This is an enormous yet, paradoxically, subtle shift and so quite difficult to articulate.

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p.582.

So let me offer a few reflections. Notice, first, how Jesus' teaching here challenges our assumptions about the world we inhabit. The behaviour he calls in question assumes a need to compete for status, to secure the regard of others. It assumes we need to receive back for what we give, that we are people who owe and are owed. This is a world of scarcity and threat, of keeping score, and it is, at one level, real and powerful – it is the world we live in. We feel the effects of it, daily. We and others are hurt, diminished, driven by these dynamics. But at another level, Jesus wants us to realize, this way of seeing things is an illusion – an illusion whose power over us relies on our continuing to act as if it were true and so to perpetuate it.

By contrast, God's world, the 'real' real world, is different. It's created out of nothing and for nothing. There's no question of owing and being owed; of merit and reward. Who among us deserved to be born? And what can we pay for the air we breathe? Creation is sheer gift, grace-ful. It's an expression of the overflowing of God's love, and our lives are nothing other than invitations to join in the adventure of what is and is coming to be. This reality, this way of experiencing life, is available to us, if only we will let ourselves realize and enter it.

So how do we do that? We give up those ways of being that perpetuate and make powerful the illusory world – the world of scarcity and threat. That means giving up the compulsion to secure our standing and identity, all too often at the expense of others. Really giving it up, and not just practicing false modesty in the hope that someone will notice our beautiful spirit and exalt us higher. True humility is being willing just to be human among all the other humans, no better and no worse than anyone else, an ordinary guest, grateful for the invitation to be here at all. I love the way poet Mary Oliver expresses it:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves.³

You have only to realize your place ‘in the family of things’, allowing yourself and therefore others to be. And from this freedom to be, follows the capacity to act as God acts – gratuitously, without keeping score, without looking for reciprocal benefit, willing to offer something for nothing. James Alison speaks about breaking the law of ‘reciprocity’,⁴ becoming a participant in the gift quality of God’s life.

There’s a beautiful simplicity that’s available here, but simplicity (as we know) is not necessarily easy. It’s hard to believe we not only cannot, but also don’t need to earn our place. It’s hard to give up the existential sense that we’re owed or owe something. That’s why often it takes an experience of failure or defeat to shift us into the place of authentic humility and grace. We have to get to the end of our capacity to keep competing, and our compulsion to ‘make’ something of or to fix ourselves. We have to be willing to stop keeping score. And sometimes too, this is just a matter of lightening up – realising the futility and smallness and non-necessity of all our striving, and with relief just letting ourselves drop it and enjoy what’s there.

Jesus teaches these things at a dinner as if they are about a dinner. ‘When you are invited to a wedding banquet’, he says ... But in the Jewish tradition, a wedding banquet is an image of the kingdom of God. And what we begin to realize is that we are invited to inhabit this kingdom now. We accept the invitation, we inhabit the kingdom, to the extent that we’re able to receive our place as gift, and make place for others. Or, as Michael Leunig puts it: ‘Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and as difficult as that’.

³ Mary Oliver, ‘Wild Geese’, *Wild Geese: Selected Poems* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2004).

⁴ James Alison, ‘Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging: *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp.54-72, p.65.