



## Look Who's Invited!

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn  
September 1, 2019



### *Luke 14:1, 7-14*

*14On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. 7When 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; 9and 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. 10But 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. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12He 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 or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

IT HAS BEEN MANY YEARS since I engaged in the ritual of the first day of school, which was the experience for many who returned to the classroom in recent weeks. My very first day of kindergarten, to this day, remains a vivid memory. My kindergarten teacher had hold of one arm trying to drag me into the classroom; my mother joined forces on the other side of me trying to push me into the classroom. Maybe I knew, even at that early age, what was to come. There were classroom rules set by the teacher, of course, but there were also rules that were unwritten, more difficult to follow because you had to learn them the hard way. The transition from elementary school to Junior High school was memorable. Instead of spending the entire day in one classroom with one teacher, in Junior High, we started the day with Homeroom. Then we had to remember locker combinations, learn how to change classes, adjust to different teachers, and there was P.E. For a chubby 7th grader, changing into gym clothes and taking public showers were hard enough; but then my times for the 50 yard dash were embarrassingly slow and when it came to rope climbing, I couldn't get myself off the gym floor, in front of all my classmates.

I HAD TO LEARN to dress like everyone else and to hang out with the right crowd. Such unwritten rules made before you even got to school were the dangerous ones. You spent days scrambling to figure out these rules in order to get yourself accepted. And even when you have it all figured out, you can still run into situations where established rules and regulations refused you admission no matter what you did or how hard you tried. Like the fraternity system when I was in college. I could only pledge and be accepted into a local fraternity. Because you see, the national fraternities on campus—Sigma Phi Epsilon and Theta Chi—had race clauses and accepted only white students.

IT'S POSSIBLE that when Jesus was invited to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, going through his mind were the many layers of written and unwritten rules. Jesus had already been challenged in the previous chapter for healing a bent-over woman on the Sabbath. According to today's text, *"they were watching him closely."* Entering the Pharisee's home, Jesus observes immediately that tension is thick and almost everyone seems to be worried about the impression he or she is making. People are jockeying for the best seats in the house, the V.I.P. seats of honor. So Jesus decides to challenge the customary behavior of the guests. He tells a parable. And in the parable, Jesus challenges them to operate differently. Look for seats at the back of the room, near the kitchen and bathroom, sitting with those for whom there are no place cards and whose names don't appear on the seating charts. For in doing so, you can avoid the embarrassment of being asked to give up your seat of honor; and vice versa to be able to gain face if you are moved up to the VIP table. This is such helpful advice and useful wisdom. Do X and you will profit.

REMEMBER that wonderful scene in *"Joy Luck Club"*, where the Chinese daughter invites her Caucasian boy friend to dinner at her home to introduce him to her family and for their approval. Her mother has spent hours preparing the meal for the special occasion. And in typical Chinese fashion, as all are seated around the table before the eating begins, the mother in customary modesty announces that she is not a very good cook and her dishes do not measure up to the standard. The boyfriend digs in serving himself large portions before anyone else has lifted their chopsticks, takes a couple of huge bites and proclaims: *"Not bad, the dish just needs soy sauce"* and proceeds to pour soy sauce all over the dish to everyone's shock and horror. Being educated on the manners around a Chinese table would've saved the boyfriend and the family much embarrassment and shame.

THE MESSAGE of Jesus' parable on table manners is neatly summarized with the words: *"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* It would be so neat and simple to just read the text as a lesson on good table manners and being socially savvy.

THE READING then continues with the true purpose of the text poking through. With the second half of our reading, Jesus directs his attention and words to the hosts and not just the other guests. Jesus launches immediately into what appears to be counter-intuitive advice. If you are celebrating a meal, do not think along the lines of the typical guest list; all they will do is repay you and then the circle is complete. We do it all the time. *"Thanks for the meal; the next one is on me."* Or, *"my treat the next time."* There is something more at stake with inviting those who **cannot repay**—*the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.* Invite the marginalized, the dis-eased and physically challenged, those who are socially and economically humbled. The Bible is always more than a book we turn to for sage advice. We don't turn to the Gospels for etiquette or directives on manners. The danger of turning to the Bible for sage advice is that it becomes a way for us to manage God—*what must I do to secure God's good graces and the proper heavenly payback?* So we try to be strategic about seating charts at banquets! The juxtaposition of the two halves of today's reading—first, the wise advice on table manners and second, a prophetic and theological challenge—shows how God intrudes upon and transforms our here and now. Even something as mundane as table manners matter because of what they can disclose about God's purpose and intentions in the midst of our everyday lives. In the second half of our reading, without speaking in parables, Jesus speaks directly to this host, the one who holds the greater measure of control over the rules of the game. His advice to this figure of power in the story works to undermine the very system that upholds status differences at meals. Instead of inviting friends, family, or the rich to meals, since they are able to repay with a corresponding invitation; Jesus calls for inclusion of those who cannot

return the invitation—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Don't invite those who help you fulfill social obligations or advance your status. Invite guests who all have additional requirements and needs without the likelihood of being able to repay. In the words of Emma Lazarus' poem on the Statue of Liberty: *"...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send those, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."* These words do not favor only the younger, healthier and wealthier newcomers; or make it easier to deny permanent residency to those relying on public assistance programs like Medicaid or those who don't show enough funds on their visa applications as our current administration is proposing. The reign of God that Jesus mandates does not reward the "haves" and further disadvantage the "have-nots."

CALVARY does not invest its huge amount of staff and financial resources in our Senior and Wednesday Playgroup programs expecting repayment. Calvary's financial investment and the participation of our many volunteers in the Breaking the Cycle of Poverty programs are not done with expectations of repayment.

EVERY TIME WE CELEBRATE the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we participate in this extravagant invitation of Jesus. *People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.* Around the table, we don't invite only those who can pay us back, or do us favors in return. There is a popular children's tale about heaven and hell; here is my favorite version. *A little Korean girl dies and meets up with God and asks God what is the difference between heaven and hell. So God takes the little girl's hand and leads her into the banquet room of hell. There she witnesses people seated around banquet tables laden with a feast of delicious food. The only eating utensils are 3 foot long chopsticks. Struggling with the chopsticks, the guests find it impossible to get any of the food into their mouths, try as they might. God then takes the little girl into the banquet room of heaven. And there, she finds the same banquet tables, the same menu of delicious food, and the same 3 foot long chopsticks. Yet, everyone around the table is enjoying the sumptuous feast, as each person is feeding the person across the table.*

THE REALITY IS that the humble far outnumber the elite in any society. Who has enough food to feed the masses? We live in a society of vast abundance that runs on the perception of scarcity. There are only so many spots on the school team, on the admissions lists of elite schools, in the club and in the boardrooms. So we are driven to compete; and the greater our status, the more we are driven to compete. Jesus challenges this whole dynamic. At the communion table, we encounter Christ, and eat and drink in tension with our culture—in conscientious objection, in revolution, and in the fierce hope of a redemptive future. Wouldn't it be something if we could find ways to redeem even the rules that regulate our behavior in Junior High School?!

AMEN.

