

When Jesus Comes to Dinner

(Series: Parables of Jesus: Posing the Scandal of His Gospel)

Let me begin this morning by thanking you for praying for me as I spoke this past Tuesday for the pastors' conference at Redeemer University in Hamilton, Ontario. The Lord gave me strength, clarity of mind, and a wonderful sense of fullness, out of which I could serve the pastors with joy.

I am, however, not sure how it went! My theme was "The Mystery of the Preaching Moment." I entitled the first session, "Exploring the Mystery." The second, "Preparing for the Mystery." And I am not sure that the texts I worked with were the right texts for those who gathered for the event. Those who planned the event read the feedback sheets, and said people were quite moved; some overwhelmed with the wonder of the mystery. But I could not myself read how the majority were processing what I was teaching. Time will tell. I have to leave the bearing of fruit in the Lord's hands. As, of course, I have to do with what I offer you today!

The text we just read tells us about another occasion when Jesus acted and spoke at a dinner party. I say "another occasion" because if you have read any of the four Gospels you know that so much of Jesus life and ministry takes place around meals. So much of His self-revelation, and thus, His revelation of the nature and character of His Father, and His revelation of the nature and character of the Kingdom of God, takes place at dinner parties. So much so that Tony Campolo, who will be with us on March 30, can write a book on Jesus' and His ministry entitled, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*.

Dinner parties, of course, are not the only place where Jesus makes and His Father and His Kingdom are made known. It is at a river (the Jordan) that we hear the Voice of the Father say to Jesus as He comes up out of the water, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well pleased." It is on a mountain shrouded in thick clouds that we hear the Voice of the Father say to three disciples of Jesus, "This is My Son, listen to Him." It is on the hill called Calvary that the glory of God breaks through as never before; when the Beloved Son of God in obedience to His Father's plan, offers Himself up as the final, sufficient sacrifice for the sin of the world; where He Who is Life Itself, gives His life for the life of the world. It is in a cemetery that He who is the Resurrection and the Life emerges as the victor over the powers of sin and evil and death, as the first-fruits of a whole new humanity. On it goes.

But it is around meals that Jesus especially likes to make Himself and His agenda for the world known. This is especially the case in the Gospel according to Luke. More than the other three Gospel writers, Luke records what happens when Jesus comes to dinner, building up to in the telling of what happened that Thursday night before Jesus goes to the cross, when Jesus transforms the Passover meal into one of the central acts of Christian worship, the Lord's Supper.

And continuing on Easter afternoon. Luke tells that powerful story of the disciples in the village of Emmaus inviting the stranger they did not know was Jesus, to have dinner with them. The stranger (Jesus) takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. “And,” Luke says, “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him” (24:31). They run back to Jerusalem joyfully telling the other disciples “The Lord has really risen!” And telling them “how He had made Himself known in the breaking of the bread” (24:35).

Thus the story in the text we read today in Luke 14: “And it came about that Jesus went ... to eat bread ...” to have dinner. Jesus makes Himself ... and His vision for a new kind of society ... known at a meal. Jesus loves to meet people at meals! Although, sometimes, as in the story before us, what He makes known radically changes the dynamics of the meal!

Let us try to be clear about the setting of the story in Luke 14. The meal takes place in the home of a Pharisee. This time with one of the “leaders of the Pharisees” as Luke emphasizes (14:1). That is, this Pharisee is a high ranking Pharisee, likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel. High ranking, and caring about his ranking. As, sadly, so many of the Pharisees did.

The meal takes place on a Sabbath, presumably after the worship service held in the local synagogue that morning. There is no way to exaggerate how important Sabbath was to the Jews of the first century. And as those who went on the study trip to Israel last month can tell you, there is no way to exaggerate how important Sabbath is to many Jews of the twenty-first century!

The day is a day for worship and rest. But in the first century, it is also a day that marks out a boundary. A boundary between those who are “in” and those who are “out.” Honoring the Sabbath in the first century was a way of declaring that one was “an insider.” The word “Pharisee” is related to the word that means “separate.” Keeping Sabbath in the first century is one of, if not the, way one lives “separate.”

To make sure that the day was “separate,” the Pharisees came up all kinds of rules and regulations. It was thought that if one kept these rules and regulations, one would end up keeping the Sabbath. Rules like not carrying anything on Sabbath, not carrying heavy objects like one’s cot or mattress. Rules like not lighting a fire on the Sabbath, which is why our strict Orthodox Jewish friends do not drive on Sabbath: in order to drive one has to turn the key, which lights a fire in the car engine. Rules like not doing medicine on the Sabbath. To do medicine, to bring healing to people, is “work” ... and one does not “work” on Sabbath.

So Jesus is at a meal in a Pharisee’s home on the Sabbath. And at this meal Jesus does medicine, He heals. And at this meal Jesus speaks to the social and spiritual dynamics of the meal. Verses 1-6 of Luke 14 – Jesus heals. Verses 7-14– Jesus speaks to the social and spiritual dynamics of the meal.

The two are related. The two are intricately related, because both involve “drosy.” I will tell you later what “drosy” is. For now, what Luke wants us to realize is that both Jesus’ act of healing and Jesus’ speaking about dinner etiquette involve “drosy.” Jesus’ act of healing – dealing with a medical form of “drosy.” Jesus’ teaching, the parable – dealing with social, relational, spiritual forms of “drosy.”

First, some questions. Why is Jesus at this dinner party? And why is the man with dropsy at this dinner party?

In his medical condition, the man with dropsy was “unclean.” His presence in the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath is therefore very problematic. The Pharisee has done everything he can to make sure that he is “clean,” making sure that according to his understanding of purity he is “pure.” The man with the medical condition, is in the Pharisee’s mind “impure,” “unclean.” The man’s presence brings “impurity,” “uncleanness” into the Pharisee’s home. He is an “untouchable.” Then what is the man doing there? How did he get into the house? Who let him in? And why did who let him in let him in?

In verse 2 of the text we read “and there ...”: “And there, in front of Jesus was a man suffering from dropsy.” “And there ...” Literally Luke says, “And behold ...” Not a declaration (“and there...”) but an exhortation (“Behold! Look!”). “Behold” in the New Testament always introduces a surprise. “Behold, in front of Jesus ...” The man should not be there! Big surprise! Then why is he there?

Why is Jesus there? He is on His way to Jerusalem. This event takes place in Luke’s so-called “Travel Narrative (Luke 9:51-19:28), where Luke relates what happens as Jesus is making His way to the Holy City. Along the way there is growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Indeed, there is growing hostility toward Jesus from the religious leaders, from Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests. So why is Jesus at this meal in a Pharisee’s home?

Some suggest that the Pharisee is simply acting on cultural expectations. When someone on a journey comes into your town or village you are expected to provide hospitality to him or her. Even if you do not particularly like the sojourner you are expected to bring them into your home and feed them so they may be nourished to continue their journey. Our Arab Christian guide in Bethlehem told us at least three times that if we wanted to stay in his town and not return to Jerusalem, he was culturally obligated to house and feed us for 3½ days! Why that number, he did not explain. But that we could stay was very clear. He did not even know us! It did not matter. We were on a journey, and he was obligated to care for us. So this Pharisee may simply be extending hospitality to Jesus the sojourner.

Others suggest that on that Sabbath Jesus had spoken in the synagogue service. He was, if you will, the guest preacher. And as “the leader,” this Pharisee was obligated to extend hospitality to the preacher on behalf of the synagogue and the village. It would have been shameful for Jesus to have preached and then not be invited to dinner in someone’s home! Even if the people gathered for the service did not like the preacher’s sermon, someone had to invite him to dinner. And the most appropriate someone was the leader of the Pharisees.

So cultural expectations could explain what Jesus is there that day. But notice in verse 3 the phrase “And Jesus answered ...” Luke says that the Pharisees were “watching Him closely” (14:1). The man with dropsy is “in front of ...” of Jesus (14:2). And Luke says, “And Jesus answered ...” Had someone spoken? No. Not audibly anyway. Had someone asked a question? No. Not audibly anyway.

But they had spoken ... and were posing a question. The Pharisees had spoken ... and were posing a question. They had spoken by bringing in the man with dropsy. The man is there because they brought him there, and placed him there. And they were posing a question. What will Jesus do with the man? What will Jesus do with this “unclean” man in the house of “clean” Pharisees on the Sabbath?

It is a trap. Clothed in cultural dynamics around hospitality. Jesus is being “set up” to see if He would mis-step. Which is why Luke says, “they were watching Him” (14:1).

How does Jesus “answer”? He heals the man of his dropsy, praise be to His name. And He tells a parable, a parable about hospitality. And the two “answers” go together. Jesus’ healing act and His parable about hospitality are intricately related – around the phenomenon of dropsy.

Dropsy is a medical condition that in our day goes by the name “edema.” And there are, as I understand, many forms of dropsy/edema. It involves an abnormal build up of fluid just below the skin or in small cavities in the body. The build up of fluid causes swelling in parts of the body. But paradoxically one of the symptoms of the excess fluid is insatiable thirst! The body retains too much fluid yet is very thirsty.

Jesus answers the Pharisees unspoken question with a question. “If is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” (14:3). They do not answer. For the answer is yes. And no. But the “no” holds no water to the “yes.”

Jesus heals the man. Luke does not say how. On other occasions Jesus speaks. Or touches. Here it just happens. Jesus heals him and sends him on his way. Jesus sends him out of the place where he was being used.

And Jesus asks, “Which one of you shall have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?” (14:5). Again, no answer. For they all would pull their son or ox out of the well. None of them would wait until sundown when the Sabbath ended to pull a son or ox out of a well.

What Jesus has done is taken the Pharisees back to God’s original intent in calling us to Sabbath. Sabbath is all about wholeness. The Sabbath day is the day of wholeness. Worship, rest, wholeness. Jesus is not violating the Sabbath. He never violates His Father’s good Law. He is living the Sabbath. He is bringing about the wholeness God wills for Sabbath. He is showing what the ultimate Sabbath is all about, what the forever Sabbath is all about. Jesus is giving the man, and the Pharisees, a taste of what the great Jubilee is all about: people released from what keeps them from wholeness. “Pull out of the well.” Literally, “release.” Jesus has come to release. Jesus has come to set captives free. It is what the God of Sabbath is wanting for the whole creation.

You realize, of course, that Jesus could have gotten out of the trap by simply stalling for a few hours. He could have waited until after sundown to heal the man. And there would have then been no controversy. Wonder! Yes, wonder that a human being had been released and made whole. But had He waited He would not have gotten into further trouble.

Then why did He not wait? Because too much was at stake. The medical form of dropsy was threatening the well-being of the man. But the social, relational, spiritual form of dropsy was threatening the well-being of the Pharisees. Had Jesus waited until sundown He would have missed the opportunity to release the Pharisees from what was keeping them from wholeness. They were being held back from entering the Kingdom Jesus is bringing into the world.

You see, in the first century, the word “dropsy” was also used in a metaphorical way. The word was used for lovers of money, for the greedy, for those who craved recognition and status. The very things that drove so many Pharisees! Recognition, influence, rank, status, money. The Greek philosopher Diogenes compared money-lovers to dropsies: “as dropsies, though filled with fluid crave drink, so money-lovers, though loaded with money, crave more of it.” And adds, “both to their demise.” [Quoted by Braun in *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 34; in Joel Green, *Luke*, 547). Status-lovers, though enjoying great status, crave more status. To their demise.

Do you see what is going at the dinner party? It is New Testament scholar Joel Green who helped me see this. This is how he puts it: The presence of the man with dropsy constitutes “a vivid parable of Jesus’ socially elite, Pharisaical table companions. Just as in front of Jesus stood a man who had dropsy, so, around the table, sat persons whose disorder was no less self-detrimental. As Jesus moves to heal the one, so with regard to the others is diagnosis pronounced and the prospect of health extended” [547]. Jesus speaks the parable to bring healing to social, relational, spiritual dropsy!

It is an amazing scene, a scandalous scene! Jesus the guest dares to criticize the host and other guests. Publically! Running the risk of getting into even more trouble. But Jesus does not mind. Too much is at stake not to speak.

You see, the sad reality is that in the first century, meals had become a way to advertise one’s social status, and they had become a way to enhance one’s social status. Hospitality had been co-opted by craving for status. Who was present at your dinner party determined your status in the eyes of the community, and in some people’s minds, your status before God. And where you sat relative to who was at the dinner either declared your status or effected your status in the community, and in some people’s minds, your status before God.

This means people had fallen into a well! A deep well. An imprisoning well. For once we start down the road of getting our self-worth from other human beings, there is no end to it. Once our sense of self gets hooked to what others think of us ... oh, my, the thirst for more kicks in. Once we gain a measure of status, and then find our worth in our status, we will thirst for greater and greater status. There is never enough.

The goodness of hospitality had been taken over by the dropsy. Because one needed to protect and increase one’s status, one would only invite people to dinner who could reciprocate. You would only invite to your dinner party those who would then invite you to their dinner party! Whom then you could again invite to your next dinner! And who would then invite you to their next dinner! On it would go. In the process excluding those who could not reciprocate. Excluding those thought to be unclean. Excluding the poor, who could never repay. Excluding those who could really use the hospitality, but whose presence would not enhance one’s status.

And because one needed to protect and increase one’s status, one needed to get the right seat at the party. Falling deeper into the well. One’s sense of well-being tied to who you were seen with at the latest dinner. What a vulnerable way to live! For as Jesus points out, you might stake out the best seat, go take your place there, only to have the host come and tell you that it was reserved for someone else. Embarrassing! Better to just come to dinner, and not worry about what seat is the best seat. Better to come to dinner with your sense of self and self-worth based on something else. Like the love of Jesus, at

whose dinner there are no best seats. They are all best seats. For He sits at every table in the room. And especially with those the money-lovers, and the status-cravers exclude.

At a meal in a “lead” Pharisee’s house, Jesus heals a human being with a medical condition, and then offers healing to human beings with a spiritual condition. He cuts through the distortions of hospitality. And thereby brings us into the hospitality of the Kingdom of God. Where we are included simply because He includes us. He invites us. It is all we need – He invites us. Rich and poor, master and servant, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, clean and unclean.

And, says Jesus, blessed are those who then invite those whom He invites. Blessed are those who join Jesus in bringing to the dinner party those whom the rest of the world ignores. Blessed are those who join Jesus in bringing to the dinner party those cannot give us anything in return. It means they are free from dropsy, that horrible condition of craving what finally does not satisfy.

So how do we respond to Jesus today? May I suggest three ways? First, since so much of Jesus’ ministry takes place around meals, why not hold a dinner party for your neighbors? And invite those whom you do not know yet. Especially invite those who do not get invited to dinner parties. Before Easter, hold a truly hospitable meal. A kingdom meal. No best seats. To which you also invite Jesus, asking Him to bring His surprise blessing. The others do not need to know you invited Jesus. He will come incognito, and He will delight to bring the blessings of His kingdom.

Second, ask Jesus for His healing. Ask Jesus, “of what do I need to be healed in order to truly be alive in Your kingdom? Of what do I need to be released? Out of what well do You want to pull me?”

And third, come to the Table He has set before us today. Jesus is the host of this one. There is no pecking order here. No one has to have achieved any status to be here. For the only status one needs is the status of being in need of what Jesus alone gives.

“Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!”