

Pr1 7C Proverbs 25:6-7 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14

We have before us lessons so filled with pithy admonition and pointed challenge that one does not know where to begin, or beginning, where it may lead us in the end.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you were being tortured. (Hebrews 13:1-3)

We could stay just with this.

A sermon on manners is not very promising. Few of us would equate gospel with books on etiquette or the setting of a table. Also, there is a danger here of turning sage advise into a way to manage God, on how to secure God's good grace by virtuous seating charts.

When it comes to dinner parties, Jesus is not Miss Manners. But he did not lack practice. Jesus and the disciples eat their way through

the Gospels. They go from place to place, house to house, one meal after another, always looking for the next invitation.

Even at that, it is surprising that Jesus would eat at a Pharisee's house. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for blasphemy because he forgave sins, for uncleanness because he ate with sinners, and for working on the Sabbath because his disciples plucked grain from a field.

Therefore as dinner begins, the Pharisees are watching Jesus carefully. Put in Jesus' place, we would be on our best behavior—careful not to talk with food in our mouth or put our elbows on the table.

Dinner at a wealthy Pharisee's house is probably more than ostentatious. You know the rules. RSVP within a reasonable amount of time. Bring a suitable gift. Do not unfold your napkin until your host does. Use your utensils from the outside in. Once you have used a piece of silverware, never place it back on the tablecloth. Do not leave a spoon in a soup cup. Never lay a napkin on the table until the dinner is over. The host signals the end of the

meal by placing his or her napkin on the table. And do not refold your napkin or wad it up! And so on.

As we might picture it, the champagne is chilled. All the “right people” are there—bankers, doctors, lawyers, and preachers. These esteemed guests are watching closely to see how Jesus fits in. The table talk is polite, as expected, centering on the new director of the symphony and the buy-out of a local factory.

Then Jesus decides to offend the guests. This scene becomes a lesson in how to lose friends and alienate people. Jesus has noticed how the Pharisees look for ways to move up the social ladder—or up the table, on this occasion. He has seen how they try to sit at the places of honor.

Jesus criticizes the guests for striving for status. “When someone invites you to dinner, you take the place of honor. Then when somebody more important than you shows up, you’re red-faced as you make your way to the last table and the only place left. You might as well go and sit at the last place in the first place. Then the host might say, ‘Come, sit with me.’ If you walk around with your

nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. Be content to be who you are."

When Jesus finishes insulting the guests, he begins to insult the host for who was included and who did not make the list: "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends, family, and those you're trying to impress, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite people who don't have similar interests, who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks, the least of our sisters and brothers, the poorest of the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They won't be able to return the favor, but God will know."

The disciples might just then have wanted to pull Jesus aside and ask him to back off a little.

"We won't have any more dinner invitations if you can't get through the appetizers without infuriating the person who invited us."

I suppose we could leave it right there and take this to be Jesus' lesson on pride vs. humility and agree that we all should take it to heart, turning it into a nudge toward personal piety.

We could at this point cite Dante's "Divine Comedy" where humility is the highest-ranking virtue, the opposite of pride, being the worst of the deadly sins.

That would most likely be all well and good. But we would be in danger of individualizing it, making it a matter of stand-alone spirituality. But for Jesus it is always relational!

The Lectionary omits vs. 2-6 which tell what happened before he enter the house.

Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him., and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.

Dropsy; I had to look it up. It is an old, old diagnosis of and old, old sorrow; the grotesque swelling of the body by the retention of water. Now we call it edema and know of its various causes. But in old books, in medical records from other generations, and in the third world where starved children suffer swollen bellies from it, dropsy is still the name for a suffering we, too, can see.

I see them, as you may, in the grocery store, riding on motor carts, or painfully pushing one gargantuan leg in front of the other. At Walmart or Walgreens, the necessary places people have to go. And I often look away, so as not to stare. I will take furtive peeks, feel sorry, am appalled. This happens among us publically.

Jesus has already accepted the dinner invitation and is on his way when he heals the man with dropsy. So they all saw this and none of them have an answer to his question because they knew it was a good thing that healed the person, but not on the Sabbath according to their teachings. They are likely torn and they are silent.

But he watched them, then, choosing places at table in this house
of distinction.

And this is when he began to talk about choosing where to sit at a
wedding feast, which is also an occasion of distinction.

I've never seen people with dropsy at a wedding feast. Have you?
Or, for that matter, at a nice dinner party? I can only think of one
such person in my experience who made it to church, and she
needed her husband and her cane to get out of the car, up the
ramp, down the aisle.

Maybe they decline some invitations, saying it is too hard for
them. But the fact is they know they appear grotesque, largely I
suppose because we shrink away. They see the little peeks, and the
way we avert our eyes, I fear.

There are distinctions in seating at our feasts, and they often
correlate with how we look.

Jesus saw this, as well. He often used the wedding feast as an image
for the reign of God, and once he talked about clothing being the

foolish distinction we use, and yet again about how foolish our preparations can be.

But in this gospel lesson he is talking about who gets invited and where they sit at the feast. He admonishes them all not to seat themselves too high up in the chain of desirability. Better to move up, than be asked to down.

And Jesus' most pointed words are for the host, who, at the next banquet, he says, should not invite the wealthy and important but the poor and lame and crippled and blind, who cannot repay the invitation.

We all know games of false humility that arise from this story: how men will hold the door for women but keep them out of the boardroom; how churches will build ramps but find reasons not to ask people in wheel chairs to be leaders; how races and cultures can be considered in ways grotesque.

In our culture, social gatherings often become red carpet events; the beautiful enter to be admired by the ordinary for their distinction, and the variously afflicted hide their wounds as best they can, or if they cannot, stay home.

Luke's gospel presents several Sabbath healings of people with grotesque afflictions, the bent-over woman, the woman with a bleeding discharge, the man with dropsy.

One commentator reminds that each story is a version of Beauty and the Beast. Beauty sees in the Beast what the rest of the world does not, and refuses to see a being unlike herself.

You may remember that at last, through a kiss, Beauty restores him to the sense that he has his beauty again. Jesus, the beauty in Luke's tales, restores many whom the rest see as grotesque, and presses the rest to see as he sees, to love as he loves, to become those who can heal distinctions based on illness, appearance, poverty, social roles, race, religion.

And this takes place on Sabbath. Sabbath, a day in which we recognize our lives and life itself as Gift.

Not what by our efforts we make of it, but by what we find in it!

Maybe even angels, to our surprise.

But which, in each life, will include something grotesque, something painful and hard, something roughed up and edgy, some beastly or dark part of others and of us.

Sabbath welcomes us to a time when all the distinctions of status and advantage fall away, and the original blessing of creation and the word of reconciliation is heard again by all.

Think of it this way. In the final act of Jesus' story, he will become the Beast.

And in his grotesque and broken body, he will wait, at the tables of daily life we each, and our community of faith, set for others.

Is waiting still, to be set free among us, here on earth, by a human kiss, once again, and again and again. Waiting.

For as the writer to the Hebrews says,

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:8