

Sermon Luke 14: 1, 7-14

‘Table Manners in God’s Realm’

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 31st, 2025

About 25 years ago, as I was still working on being ordained here in the U.S., the pastor of the (Lutheran) church I attended back then invited me to lead a Bible study. I don’t remember what the topic of the study series was; but I remember one particular incident. A little background here: Lutherans are really big on God’s grace, and so, one Sunday, we were talking about the implications of God’s grace. Who is included? Even the jerk, the dictator, the rapist, the killer? Will they make it to heaven, will they be included in the realm of God? One particular woman – a lifelong Lutheran, nonetheless – just crossed her arms, leaned back in her chair, and said, ‘I don’t think so.’ When I, a little taken aback, talked about God’s amazing grace that even saves the wretches (as the famous and beloved hymn says), she reluctantly conceded, but added, ‘Well, such people might be in heaven, but I know I’m going to be sitting much closer to the throne of God.’

What do *you* think? And how would you react if you got to heaven, and discovered that Hitler, Stalin, Osama Bin Laden, mass shooters like the one who killed 2 children and injured countless more this past week, and other despicable folks from history past and present, were there? People who’ve committed every possible sin under the sun, and yet are invited by a gracious God to be part of the heavenly banquet? I don’t know about you, but that’s a tough one for me. Don’t we have hell for such people? Wasn’t hell created for such people?

Now of course, there is no guarantee that we will find the great villains of history in heaven, God’s realm, even though God may forgive them and offer grace to them. Martin Luther once said: we are all beggars for God’s grace and forgiveness. But even a beggar still has to hold out their hand to receive it. I have a hunch that there may be those who outright refuse God’s grace – because they don’t think they need it, for whatever reason. I sometimes wonder if someone like Hitler, looking back on his life here on earth, would be even capable of recognizing and confessing the evil he’s committed, and stammer, ‘Oh God, what have I done?’ But you never know...

Well, and then there is the whole matter of: Do I want to spend eternity with all those who are invited into the kingdom of God? I wonder if those who deny their

siblings here in this life a place at the table – be it in churches or in society – would be able to accept that the very same people somehow made it into the realm of heaven, embraced by God’s grace, receiving the same treatment.

And will *we* be able to accept that the realm of heaven may be populated by jerks, dictators, rapists, killers, those who have committed any possible sin under the sun - those who (we think) deserve hell? So being part of this realm of justice, peace, and enough for all not only depends on holding out our hand and accepting grace for ourselves - but also on accepting grace for others. And so I think that going to heaven (whatever this means) may be a self-selective process. Either you roll with God’s judgment – that we are all predestined for grace, and may have to share eternity with folks we think are undeserving, treated in the same loving and merciful manner by God – or say, ‘no, thanks, I don’t think this is the place for me. I imagined this to be different, and that I’d spent eternity with those folks I liked to hang out with in my life on earth.’

So this whole ‘getting to heaven’ thing is tricky. But then Jesus never said following him was easy; love, grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation are hard work! And they require that we overcome our pride, prejudice, favoritism, and self-righteousness.

And that’s what today’s scripture lesson is all about. Except Jesus is bringing the whole debate about what to expect in the kingdom of heaven down to earth, literally. Jesus is invited to a banquet, and the guests have to find a place at the table, as there is no assigned seating. No modern wedding planner would make *that* mistake! The places of honor of course are close to the host – that’s still the case today as it was back then. At a wedding reception, for example, it’s the closest family members and friends who sit close to the couple – and often the pastor, too! Although even a well thought-out seating assignment is no guarantee that nobody will feel slighted. I’ve been invited to a lot of weddings, I’ve seen it all (like folks switching out placement cards, because they think they deserve better).

But for Jesus, it’s not just about the politics of banquet seating – his intention is not to give advice in the style of ‘Miss Manners’ or ‘Dear Abby’ – but he is teaching his listeners a lesson. And, as so often, it is a lesson about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, which, he prays (and we pray, too, every Sunday), may come on earth as it is in heaven. As those following Christ, we are challenged to live the kingdom in the here and now, and not just to wait to die and go to heaven – well, hopefully.

And so Jesus teaches us that we should be prepared to find no assigned seats of honor in the kingdom of heaven. There is no one who, offhand, is more important than the other. We are all children of God. Now most parents say that they have no favorite child, even though that may not be quite true. I think that God, the perfect heavenly parent, indeed has no favorites – except maybe Jesus Christ, the beloved son – and treats everyone the same in grace and mercy. We are challenged to model this in our behavior already here on earth, as we treat every child of God with the dignity, love, grace, and compassion they deserve. Yes, even the bad guys and gals. That doesn't mean we just coddle them and condone their behavior, but that's another sermon...

And: In God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, even those we may consider 'undesirable' are invited. Jesus mentions the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – those at the bottom of the totem pole of society, those who can't repay favors, those who are not useful for our agendas. *Any* child of God is invited to take a seat at the table and to feast on God's goodness and mercy. All are deserving. All are important in this realm of justice and peace. It's not about personal accomplishments: it's about community. If we pray that this kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven, again, we are challenged to live into to vision in the here and now.

I guess that's a good trial run – if, in the here and now, we get used to breaking bread and sharing God's goodness with those we usually don't mingle with, with those we have prejudices about, maybe even those we can't stand (for whatever reason), we won't be so surprised once the heavenly kingdom is fully established among us. If we practice the difficult tasks of forgiveness and reconciliation here and now already, we shouldn't have too much trouble accepting God's ultimate invitation to dwell in the kingdom of heaven and sit in any place at the heavenly banquet.

Which leads me to one last thought: are there any bad seats in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus says over and over again that, as he is in the heavenly father, so his followers are in him, and he in them. In another place, Jesus famously says, what you've done to one of the least of these, you have done to me. There is a bit of Christ, there is a bit of God incarnated in everyone. Together, we are the body of Christ. Which means that, wherever we take our place in God's kingdom, be it in heaven or on earth, we sit right next to Christ, in a way. And I would hope we move about a bit, not just hanging out with the same folks over and over, but

meeting different facets of God's greatness and vastness in all kinds of people – just eating, drinking, and being merry, rejoicing in the company of God and all the saints – whoever they may be.

So as for the table manners in the kingdom of heaven, as it is on earth, Jesus lays them all out: take your seat. Don't think too highly of yourself. Forgive, as you have been forgiven. Share, as you have been shared with. Don't apply labels to your neighbor, but see and accept them as a child of God. Strive for community, not individual achievements. And I will be with you, partying on – till the end of days. Amen