

I'm very sorry, but we're not intended to be comfortable with this parable. Most of us at least aren't. One or two of us might fit the category of marginalized and shut out, but I want us to be honest with each other here today; for most of us hearing this story are the haves in this story. And we may as well admit it. If that parable doesn't make us sit up a little bit higher in our seats, a little bit uneasy, then maybe we need to read it again. It will probably help in hearing the parable and interpreting it if we begin with the acknowledgment that we are sinners. Happy Labor Day by the way.

I believe that you all come to church with the best possible motives. I really do. I believe you come here because you are seeking to live authentic Christian lives. I believe you come here because you want to discern the will of Jesus Christ for how you go about that living. I believe that you come here because you know that there is something transcendent, holy other, not yourself, that you will encounter in this hour. I believe that you come here in order to find meaning in events that might otherwise seem rather ordinary.

I believe you have good motives for being here, and I believe that most of you think I have good motives for being here too. I really don't try to set myself up as any sort of exemplar of Christian virtue in a way that is out of the ordinary. Just so we are clear, I am as flawed, selfish and egotistical as anyone you'll ever meet. Mind you, I don't think I'm any worse than anyone else that you'll meet; I just don't think I'm any better. Moreover, in the acknowledgment that we are sinners, I don't think any great purpose will be served sitting around comparing our sins. It is sufficient for us just to acknowledge that we are sinners. I had a seminary classmate by the way, who had a deep-seated need to make a personal confession every time he'd done something that might be perceived to be sinful in some nature. For some reason he would seek me out to make this confession, and eventually he began to be disappointed that I wasn't scandalized by his sins. They were bad enough, I suppose, but I just didn't find anything particularly original in them, and subsequently he found someone more pious he could offend with greater ease.

But there really isn't any purpose in comparing sins. It is sufficient to note that in the living of life we encounter some brokenness now and again. We contribute to some brokenness, now again. We are sinners.

The reason that we should not sit so easily with our parable today is that Jesus, in the telling of it, does not appear to be interested in establishing rules of etiquette. Still though, a little bit of insight into the etiquette of the first century might be useful. Here is the Emily Post Guide to Palestinian Dinner Parties in the first century. If you accept an invitation to dinner, you are expected to attend. Right? But not so much, apparently. It was the responsibility of the host to send you an invitation, and then to follow up with a personal invitation the day of, from a slave, wherein you were permitted to send your regrets, or to send your indication that you would be there. And then, you could just sort

of filter in as the party went along. Anytime during the first course would be fine. And there was a certain set of predetermined circumstances in which a dinner guest could legitimately be allowed off the hook, as it were, for a prior invitation, so long as they send word back with the slave. Interestingly, (this is not really relevant to the sermon but I think it's useful)...If you ever need to know the excuses for getting out of a holy war, they are the same excuses for getting out of a dinner invitation. Apparently, dinner parties are very serious business in the first century. Here are the exceptions: an unconsummated marriage, that one seems reasonable enough; the purchase of a field that has not yet born fruit, and that one, for the purposes of understanding our story today, can be expanded to include livestock necessary to tend said field, and finally, an incomplete real estate deal. Any one of these circumstances were sufficient to send a note back to the host that you would not be able to make the dinner party. In other words, these guests sent back perfectly legitimate excuses. These are not, oops, I overslept, moment excuses. These are legitimate excuses, good enough to get you out of a holy war, or a dinner invitation.

The problem is that the host does not appear to be interested in excuses. The table is prepared; the food is ready, and there's no one there to receive it.

Now, I will readily admit that my ire would be raised at this moment were I the host. If I went to the effort of uncorking a bottle of wine and fixing something to eat, which implies I'm going to have to clean the kitchen up later, and found out that I'm going to be sitting in my dining room with way too much food in an empty house, I would be a bit irritated. Probably you would too. I would probably be offended. More the point, I think I would be hurt, and perhaps you would too. So I expect most of us resonate with the irritation of the host. "Fine! You don't want my dinner? I'll get some other guests. I want don't want you either. You, slave, go get me some more guests. I don't care who, but anybody other than the original guest list will be perfectly fine. Get them; bring them in."

But apparently, despite the fact you and I would hear the story that way, that's not how it would have been heard in the first century. The excuses are good ones. None of Jesus' hearers would've been shocked by the lack of follow through on the dinner guests. There's nothing offensive about missing a dinner party for legitimate reasons. But even still, the host says go and find new guests, so that the house may be filled. And so the slave goes out and gets some guests, just like he's told. What's interesting to note about the guests is the choice. The choice of the second string dinner guests is a bit interesting, to say the least. It's surprising. The host sends the slave out and he doesn't bring back a set of guests of the same social standing, but rather goes about finding all of the stray cats in the neighborhood to come into the house and have dinner. Poor? Come on in. Maimed? You're welcome here. Blind? Give me your hand. It's this way. Lame? Lean on me. The door is this way.

That Jesus told a story that is radically inclusive is not really lost on us. I think we get that. I think certainly this congregation gets it. In the house of the Lord all are welcome. We get that. But there's something else going on in the story. This is a wide variety of guests, but what they all have in common is that in the economy of the first century, they are insignificant. They are liabilities. This is harsh. I realize it, but they serve no valuable

function in society. They are dead weight, or so they would be seen. They are incapable of making an economic contribution to the community. Even worse, in a society that judged social propriety by physical wholeness, they also are not whole. Poor, maimed, blind, lame. In a society that values physical wholeness, they're suspect. The hearer might not be able to put their finger on exactly what's wrong, but they know that something is off.

At a glance for us, the second string guest list ought to look like good news. We, after all, are the tradition of grace. We sing about it. We talk about it. We are the tradition that does not believe that one must be perfect in order to enter the church. We are the tradition that claims the moral high ground of welcoming refugees from the moral low ground. We make that claim, but I would be very concerned about paying too close attention to the categories. At a glance, it ought to seem like good news to us because it indicates that the welcome extended to all the imperfect people of the world to come into God's heavenly banquet has great news for us, because if all of these folks can come in, then certainly fine upstanding folks like you and me ought to be able to waltz right up to the head of the table. Shouldn't we?

Now, what was it Jesus said about the seating arrangements? Don't sit above your station; don't move too quickly up the ladder. What if the host has invited someone more important than you? Oh yes, when we hear the story initially it should have been great news for us. We're not Pharisees; that is his audience. We're not the Pharisees!

I have drawn analogies, through the years, between Presbyterians and Pharisees. I get that. But despite those analogies, and our Book of Order, we're looking at a situation where you have folks *inside* the temple community and *outside* the temple community. As the Gentiles, we would be decidedly outside the temple community, so at first glance, at an easy read, this should be great news to us. It was good news then; it ought to be good news to us now. It just shows that God has thrown open the gates of the kingdom, and everyone is invited in.

But the reason the story ought to make us a little uncomfortable is that we need to be honest about who we are in the story. You know what I think? I think we're the establishment, now. I think we're exactly the sorts of people that Jesus is talking about in this story. The reason it ought to make us supremely uncomfortable is when it ends, the outsiders have been invited in, and the insiders have been turned out.

Are you uncomfortable yet? Fred Craddock says something about this story in his commentary on Luke that really bugs me, and I mean it really annoys me. Listen to what he says. "The parable can be heard historically: prophets gave the first invitation; Jesus calls those invited; they refuse; the unacceptable in Israel and Gentiles are invited. The parable can also be heard polemically, as a defense and justification of the church whose membership included persons who would have been or were rejected in most circles. Or the parable may be heard as a prophetic word of Jesus to a church rapidly becoming 'the establishment' uttering pious phrases, comfortable in a false confidence of its own salvation, and no longer inviting to God's table the poor, the maimed, the lame and the

blind. In any case, the first task of the preacher or the teacher,” and this is the part that annoyed me, “is not to interpret the parable for others but to hear it, personally and as a member of the community of disciples.”¹

I imagine you can see why I don't like that. It's personal. It's personal to me; it says I have a responsibility outside of the content of this hour in how I live my life. To hear this parable means that I, as the pastor of the church, must come to the church willing to look at it through new eyes. I don't like that. I like what's comfortable. I'm sure you do too.

Some people are good at upsetting applecarts and looking for new things to do. Some people are good at going out and pulling people in off the hedgerows and saying come on in. Some people are good at this, because it comes naturally to them. Another of my seminary classmates, not the sinner I mentioned earlier, but a different sinner, had the ability to talk to absolutely anyone. She could talk to a wall. I am not like that. I'm actually quite the opposite. Despite the fact that I climb up in a pulpit, I can be at times somewhat a shy person. I am a teacher and a preacher, and that is my comfortable place. And when Fred Craddock starts meddling and telling me that I need to take a close eye at this parable, and what it says to me about my life, well I can just imagine about how you're feeling right now. As the preacher says, you should look at your life.

The truth is I can come up with good excuses as to why I am not the right person to go out and search the hedgerows for people to drag in to church by the collar, but they're just excuses. No matter how fancifully I work my words around to make it sound like a violent act to bring somebody into church -- it just isn't. I know my deficiencies and I can explain them, but that doesn't make them go away. I imagine you're listening to my uncomfortable soliloquy and that you know where you fit into it also.

Where do you fall into the story by the way? Are you poor; are you lame; maimed; blind? Where is it you fall into this story?

Maybe you are the establishment. Jesus' point in suggesting that the heavenly banquet is going to include a lot of not quite whole people is that it is going to include a lot of not quite whole people. God wants all kinds of people. I dare say that if we're honest with ourselves as we read this story, we know who we are; and that's why it's useful to remember that we're sinners.

I promise you I don't mean that judgmentally. Set aside any Calvinist baggage attached to the word sin. What we're really talking about is the aspect of brokenness that we encounter, every one of us, from time to time, the brokenness we encounter in our own lives or the brokenness to which we contribute in the lives of others. I think we can acknowledge that. But when the church falls on dangerous times is when we draw a line between what I like to think of as the socially acceptable sins and those that will land you in a prayer of confession. Here's what I mean. For years, I have kept a cartoon that I think captures the essence of sin in the modern church. It's a scene from a corporate boardroom overlooking a view of some large city, the kind we would see in shows like “The

¹ Craddock, Fred. Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990. p 180

Apprentice”. There is a rather pompous looking man sitting at the head of the table, addressing the meeting. The caption reads: “Before we discuss destroying the competition, screwing our customers and laughing all the way to the bank, let's begin this meeting with a prayer.”

Socially acceptable sins fly right under the radar; they don't come with telltale signs. You can't see this kind of brokenness, but it's there. All of us on the inside, we're familiar with socially acceptable sins, but they're still sins. If we can't acknowledge it, it's going to take a lot more work for God to heal us.

But Luke has given us in Jesus' parable, a warning shot. In the heavenly kingdom, those of us on the inside, are likely to find ourselves turned out for our own good. The body of God's followers after all, isn't the gathering of insiders. The body of God's followers is the gathering of sinners who know their place at the table. And that place at the table is as God's beloved child invited in by grace. Jesus is telling this group of religious folks, this group of Pharisees, not to be so sure of themselves, not think that they are so holy, not to assume that they have the market cornered on being God's people.

That doesn't mean that I don't see any hope in this passage. I do. This passage tells me once more that even as a sinner, even as one undeserving of God's love through any merit of what I have done, there is a place at God's table for me. And there is a place at God's table for you.

But the parable tells me not to assume anything. The parable tells me that God loves people other than me. The parable also tells me that God expects me to love other people enough to do something about it.

The reason I'm pretty sure this is an uncomfortable parable is because we are located on prime real estate in a great section of town. And just like any church, that determines just about as much as anything, who is in here, which is to say that we're pretty privileged, individually and as a congregation. And in the Bible, God seems to care a great deal for the oppressed, the poor, the physically and spiritually impoverished. Indeed, through the story of the Bible, all through the story of the Bible, if you pay attention to what God is doing, God is working for those who cannot work for themselves, is working for those who have been pushed to the outside. God is ending wars, feeding the hungry, saying to people, “You matter! If the world says you don't matter, remember, you matter to me.”

Jesus is telling us in this parable, how it is yet again, and inviting us to step outside long enough to see it. You see, it's not so much that God is itching to turn us out. It's just that, unless we're willing to get off our blessed assurances, God may ask us to move over.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.