

Lucia Lloyd's sermon  
August 29, 2010  
Luke 14: 1, 7-14

One of the things we tend to forget about Jesus is how much time he spent at parties. He spent so much time at parties that people accused him of being a glutton and a drunk. He does his first miracle at a wedding reception, when he turns water into wine. Throughout his ministry the gospels show him at one dinner party after another. When there isn't dinner party going on, he starts one. When he comes across Zacchaeus in a tree, he immediately invites himself over to have dinner at Zacchaeus's house. When people don't have dinner, he feeds the five thousand. The last thing he does before his arrest is eating and drinking with his disciples, the Last Supper.

Today's gospel reading is no exception. We find Jesus is a guest at a dinner party hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. But the guests seem to be spoiling the party by fussing over the seating arrangements. Everybody wants to sit in the places of honor.

There are plenty of people in the world who pay attention to what their status is in any group. And some of the people who like to be seen as very important are, believe it or not, churchgoers! This comes as a great shock to you, I'm sure.

For those of you who have never had a bad experience with a church person who likes to be seen as very important, I will tell you about my own worst experience with an egotistical church person, which happened when I was a Presbyterian and a seminary student. I was the token seminary student on a committee of ministers and laypeople who were in charge of planning some major events in the Presbytery, or at least they seemed major to me at the time. I was very pleased to be asked, of course, and I was looking forward to getting to know some of the Important People in the presbytery. Things began well. I volunteered to plan one of the events and got started on the planning, in consultation with the rest of the committee. The minister who was chairperson of the committee praised the work I had done, and I just glowed with satisfaction. Then she unexpectedly had to move to Wisconsin, and we got a new chairperson, Sarah.

Sarah immediately began bragging relentlessly about how important she was in the presbytery, how many important people she knew, how close she was with all these influential people, and so on. There can be a kind of childlike charm in people who take

delight in their own accomplishments, but the message behind almost all of Sarah's statements was clearly, "I'm better than you." I gained a new appreciation for the ways in which telling people, "I'm better than you" does not actually make them love and respect you! I left several of those meetings muttering to myself: "I will never, ever, ever, brag about myself ever again" or "I never want to meet another Important Person in the Presbytery in my entire life" or "Please God, send me out to feed some homeless people instead!"

All of us are reluctant to see the sin of pride in ourselves, but we know exactly how hideous it is when we see it in other people. We do not talk much about the sin of pride in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are afraid that calling pride a sin might interfere with healthy self-esteem and a positive attitude. But the irony is that those who have a healthy self-esteem and a positive attitude are happy with themselves and do not feel the need to make sure everyone else knows exactly how important they are. The sin of pride has nothing to do with a sense of satisfaction in a job well done. It has nothing to do with the ability to know where your talents are. The sin of pride can be summed up in those four words: "I'm better than you." As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, the only people who say, "I'm better than you" are the people who don't truly believe it themselves. Pride is the one sin that is competitive by its very nature. The temptation is to think that we can feel better about ourselves by putting others down and by putting ourselves ahead of them. This has disastrous effects on others. It also has disastrous effects on ourselves because it eats away at us from the inside. The more we feed our desire to prove ourselves better than others, the more voracious our appetite becomes. Since these competitions never really satisfy us, even when we win, the sin of pride just makes our self-esteem worse.

Sarah was particularly interested in exerting power over me. I am not exaggerating when I say that she tried to revise every letter I wrote, reschedule every event I'd planned, and upstage every appearance I made. It was not pretty. In the end, it was a learning experience, because I had to face the realization that part of the reason I was upset by her desire to be in charge and to look important was because of my own desire to be in charge and to look important. And I realized how hollow and pitiful those desires were, both for her and for me, how much they ratcheted up anxiety for both of us,

how much they got in the way of compassion and creativity, how far they were from the life Jesus calls us to lead.

It may seem on the surface that today's reading is ordinary advice on being polite at social events, a nice little etiquette lesson from Jesus. But what it requires of us is a totally new way of living. Every other voice in our society encourages us to get ahead, to succeed, to compete, to impress. But when we come to church, we hear that Jesus says the exact opposite. Jesus says, strive for downward mobility. Seek the lowest place.

Jesus knows how hard it is for us to change our attitudes. He knows that often we need to change our behavior so that our attitudes will follow. So in addition to showing us how to change our behavior when we are guests, he tells us what positive action we can take if we want our lives to be transformed: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

I am still working on incorporating more hospitality toward the poor into my own personal life. In my ministry, I am to have had the opportunity to go one Friday a month to preach and celebrate the Eucharist in the women's section of the Richmond City Jail. I will confess that I have just as strong a temptation as anyone to focus on making a good impression on other people. I think it's all about me. But when I have stood in that bleak gray multipurpose room at the jail, and seen the women file in, in their orange jumpsuits, I felt no desire whatsoever to tell those women about my big accomplishments or my fancy education or my status in society.

They live every day in a clamor of insults and threats and curses, and I have seen how eager they are for a kind word or a smile, how attentively they listen for a message of hope in the scriptures and preaching. When they hear a message of hope, they are not embarrassed to affirm it themselves. After I preached, I often invited them to talk about how the scriptures touched their lives, and they did. For example, one woman spoke of how God had kept her going as she carried burdens that would have crushed me long ago. Another asked me with an urgency close to tears, whether God will be able to keep her off heroin when she gets out, or whether that is just her own wishful thinking. Another

asked me to pray for her toddler and preschooler, who suffer most from their mother's incarceration. In the presence of their pain, my pretensions fall away, like scales from my eyes.

The women bravely try to follow the intricacies of the Episcopal liturgy, but they sometimes get mixed up about which lines they say and which lines I say, and several times when they have seen me put my arms up in the orans position, they've put their arms up too: and who am I to tell them they aren't priests? And when we sing, they fill that dismal jail with a joy that is contagious, even to a tone-deaf Episcopal priest like me. We celebrate Jesus. It sure beats jostling for prestigious seats.

The good news of the gospel is that we are all invited to a party with Jesus. If we spend our time thinking about the seating arrangements and the places of honor, we will spoil the celebration not just for the other guests, but for ourselves. Jesus invites us to the party not so that we can compete with each other, but so we can love each other. It is the opportunity of a lifetime.

Lately I have been rereading a book by Martha Beck entitled *The Joy Diet*. She writes of having one of her first glasses of wine, at a dinner party with friends at a restaurant in Switzerland.

"We all clinked glasses, and I was about to guzzle my wine like Kool-Aid when one of my friends, a dapper Swiss gentleman with a handlebar moustache, stopped me. 'That's not how you drink wine,' he said. 'You have to keep your glass up while you look at each person in the group. I mean really *look* at them, into their eyes. Feel what they mean to you. Then, once you've really seen everyone, take a sip.' The restaurant fell silent as we all followed my friend's instructions. Suddenly, the meal took on a feeling of holiness. I realized for the first time that evening how radiant my friends were to me, how precious this moment of shared time that had never existed before and would never return. As the evening passed we went from quiet cerebral discussion to wild hilarity and back, several times. But the sacredness never faded." (205)

Secular language has no words for an experience such as that one, and so writers in the secular world have to speak in religious language, which has words such as "holiness" and "sacred." Reading a passage like this one reminds me of what a tremendous gift and opportunity we have in the Eucharist. Sometimes it takes a voice

from the secular world to enable us to hear what Jesus has been trying to tell us all along. I feel like one of those women who has a vase she bought for ten bucks at a yard sale twenty years ago, and in the summers she puts it on the family supper table with wildflowers in it and thinks it's pretty. And then one day the guy on Antiques Roadshow takes a look at it and tells her it's from the Ming Dynasty and worth eight and a half million dollars.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are invited to a dinner party with Jesus. We can spend our time thinking about the seating arrangements, or thinking of how many people in the pews are hypocrites, or thinking "I'm better than you," or thinking how wrong the church is for not doing things the way I want them done. Or we can really look at the community that is gathered, with all its flaws, as the body of Christ. We can realize how radiant our community is, how precious this moment of shared time that has never existed before and will never return. And we can look at Jesus himself, who is humble enough to be present with us in the bread and the wine in ways that we can not understand, we can only celebrate. And our meal can take on a feeling of holiness. The gifts of God for the people of God.

Louie Crew says, "Many whom we know well are starved for the spiritual food we receive daily." He is right, of course. Invite them to the party. Jesus eats and drinks with Pharisees. Jesus eats and drinks with the poor. Jesus eats and drinks with the blind and the lame. Jesus eats and drinks with Sarah. Jesus eats and drinks with the women in the jail. Jesus eats and drinks with me, and with you. It is an amazing party. It is a good and joyful thing.