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One of our Bishops, the late Bp. Cahoon said of this Gospel lesson that *St. Luke describes what sounds, almost literally, like the dinner party from hell*. We find in this morning's Gospel an elaborate set up, which at first appears quite simply that one of the chief Pharisees has invited Jesus to his house to eat. But it is pretty clear that the invitation was less an act of sociable kindness than a kind of trap or temptation, luring Jesus as he does to dine with him on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

To fully understand what is going on in this Gospel lesson, first we need to consider the Sabbath. The fourth of the Ten Commandments reads, *Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day*. The original purpose of the commandment was to see to it that nobody worked all the time. The logic of it is that *God created for six days and then rested on the seventh. If even God took a day off, you should too!* We need time off to function properly. God does not smile upon workaholics. And so, the emphasis in the commandment is on rest, rest for people, rest for animals, even rest for the land. However, what should have been a simple thing to do, resting on the seventh day, became highly complex. Between the time of Moses and the time of Jesus, Hebrew scholars had over-complicated the original commandment. The result was that there were one hundred and fifty-three regulations which spelled out what constituted working on the sabbath. For example, one could walk a certain distance but no further. One could do some things but not others, and the rhyme or reason was just as esoteric. The regulations were so meticulous that the Sabbath had gone from being a day of rest and relaxation to a day spent under the onerous burden of anxiety and worry about violating it by accidentally breaking one rule or another. Jesus was known to be opposed to all of that, constantly reminding the rabbis about God's original intention, *The sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*.

So, Jesus knew being invited over for a Saturday meal probably meant there would be more on the menu than bread. As he walked into the Pharisee's house, he nearly fell over a man who was plagued with swelling, or water retention, what the King James calls *the dropsy*. Interestingly, this fellow with *the dropsy*, with swelling, is a symbol of pride. The man's physical swelling is to the Pharisee's spiritual swelling of pride. But the Pharisees have not brought this man into contact with Jesus out of mercy. Jesus' religious enemies, who have also been invited to the party, are conducting a kind of cruel experiment, watching to see what He will do. Never one to pass up a moment of high drama, Jesus looks over at them and asks, *is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day?* They don't answer anything. If they said, "Yes," they might be accused of encouraging Jesus to break their own Sabbath regulations. If they said, "No," they would look even more heartless than they probably were.

Jesus does not wait around for any further debate. He heals the man and lets him go. Then he points out the hypocrisy of his self-appointed judges by saying, *You won't tell me if it is lawful to restore a human being to health on a Saturday, but you know perfectly well that if you go home this afternoon, and you find one of your prize animals has fallen into a ditch, you are going to haul him out, and you are not going to stop to ask yourself what day of the week it is*. Jesus accuses them of valuing the wellbeing of their livestock over the wellbeing of a fellow human. As they stood there in silent astonishment, the host announced that it was time to eat. Jesus watched as quite a few of the invited guests climbed all over one another to secure a seat closest to the host, in close enough proximity to grab his attention and favor. Jesus suggests their behavior is a bad strategy. Not only is it loutish and mortifying from the standpoint of Miss

Manners or Emily Post, but it shows deep spiritual dislocation as well. It reveals their pride and vanity.

And yet these Pharisees who prided themselves on being legalistic and scholars of the scriptures, if they had truly known the scriptures, would have remembered the saying attributed to King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs, who says *do not put yourself forward in the king's presence, or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told "come up here", take the greater seat, than to put lower in the presence of the noble*. Jesus echoes the words of King Solomon, and the prophet Jeremiah who writes, *be not proud... humble yourselves and sit down*. What an awkward dinner conversation that must have been, Jesus the carpenter and itinerant rabbi tells the learned Pharisees that it is a far better strategy to take a lower seat at the table. His reasoning is that if that is indeed where you are supposed to be, nobody will need to say anything, and nobody will be embarrassed. But if you are in fact supposed to have the better seat you think you deserve, then the host will invite you up higher. Not only will everyone know you are important, but they will be convinced of your humility too.

The deeper meaning of all this should be obvious. Jesus is not really all that concerned with seating arrangements at dinner parties. The deeper meaning is that God loves humility and not arrogant pride and hubristic self-importance. God exalts the humble and brings down the proud. God is not impressed with people who drop his name or try to make other people think they are extremely spiritual and have a special in with him. The lawyers and Pharisees had revealed that they were guilty of doing that. They had made it almost impossible to follow the sabbath commandment by adding rules which only they fully understood, rules from which they would exempt themselves if it suited their convenience. Taking the best seats at the party was a social manifestation of their spiritual problem. They were only interested in outward show and in impressing other people with their piety and their importance.

God has an extremely limited interest in outward displays of piety. God looks at the heart, because He can tell, without any particular help from us, whether we are really with him or against him, whether we are really for God or for ourselves. If all we are looking for in this life is the good opinion of other people, we will find that it is not terribly hard to get. But the good opinion of God is the only thing that has any enduring value, so we are better advised to spend our time cultivating it. We get God's good opinion not by showing off, but by being sorry for our sins, as St. Paul puts it, *in lowliness and meekness ... forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.