

“Living as Honored Guests”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

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In case the ads for huge savings on mattresses, cars, and furniture sets haven’t tipped you off, it’s Labor Day weekend. All over the country, families are gathering for a weekend at the lake, or the park, or at the historic homeplace. There will be parades, and picnics, races, and cookouts. Schools and banks and many businesses will be closed on Monday, so that as many people as possible can enjoy the company of loved ones and mark the turning point from summer to fall. For many families, this weekend is an opportunity for family reunions, and for people everywhere it is an excuse to fire up the grill and share a meal with people they love. One extra day added to our weekends allows for some of the most memorable and wholesome activities in our social calendar. Imagine if every week, all year long, we treated one day with this much anticipation and joy. What if every weekend was long enough to enjoy the company of the ones we love, sharing simple foods and reveling in the weather of the day?

This is sort of what Jesus is up to today. In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath meal is one of simple fare, prepared the day before in enough abundance to last until sundown of the following day. Because no one is to work on the Sabbath, not even the women of the household or the animals in the barn, whatever is made the day before has to be enough to feed an entire family, plus guests and any travelers who happened to be passing through on the eve of the day of rest. Jesus has been invited to share in this meal by a Pharisee, someone who’s own

colleagues are very skeptical of the wandering preacher's strange message and unorthodox Sabbath practices. We don't know if Jesus was invited by this leader out of curiosity, or as some kind of test, or if his host was one of the few who were willing and ready to receive Jesus's good news. What we do know, is that Jesus was invited, and he accepted that hospitality, all the while aware of the gaze of his Pharisee critics, and probably some quizzical looks from his own followers.

The Son of God walks into this simple meal on the day of rest, and sees something incredibly human. The invited guests are shuffling themselves around to ensure that everyone is seated according to his rank, with the most important guests being closest to the host. To be invited to sit closer to the host is a huge honor, and it is likely that some guests feel more entitled to that honor than others. We don't know where in this shuffle Jesus would have fallen, but he at least had the time to observe how his fellow guests were evaluating themselves against one another. I would not be surprised if Jesus never did sit down, moved as he was by the teaching moment.

First, Jesus offers them, and us, a bit of very practical advice, an etiquette lesson. When you have been invited to a wedding banquet, sit in a place of less honor, so that if someone more honored than you has been invited, you will not have to embarrass yourself by moving down. Regardless of your rank or position, seat yourself at the lowest place, farthest away. This way, your host might have the opportunity to honor you by calling out to you to come closer. While it makes a lot of sense as a strategy for avoiding a faux pas, we need the rest of Jesus' words to make any sense of how it relates to our lives as people of God.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

These words call us back to the song of Jesus' mother, the magnificat, a song of praise to God and a prophetic image of the kind of healing God brings to his people. The mighty will be cast down from their thrones, the lowly will be lifted up. The hungry will be filled up, the rich will be emptied. Jesus delivers this punch line to clue us in that he is not talking about any wedding banquet. Jesus is telling us what status and honor will look like at the banquet of heaven.

If we look again at Jesus' seating arrangement with kingdom eyes, we can see that the host of this banquet is none other than Christ himself, seated at his Father's table and surrounded by the family of his bride, the Church. We, as children of the Father, are all invited guests, drawn to the table of fellowship with God. But when we presume to know what our place will be at that table, when we assume ourselves to be the most righteous and highly to be praised, we risk seating ourselves in the place that can only belong to Christ.

When we sequester our lives from our faith, when we give ourselves over to temptations and distractions that put up walls between our hearts and those of our fellow Christians, when we give God the time of day only one day in seven or even less, we have pulled ourselves up to the table in a place that is not ours to occupy. When we sit down beside the throne but see in it not the one who loves us but the things we crave that can never love us back—money, stability, fame, power—we have declined the invitation to the feast altogether.

Again and again we in our human self-centered way seat ourselves in the place of God, and are asked gently, then persistently, to move down. We nudge one another out of the way, or

worse, judge one another unworthy to be at the table at all. What Jesus saw at the Sabbath meal was an image of the ways we lose sight of him, and in the process lose one another.

In the light of this kingdom banquet, Jesus' advice to his host takes on breathtaking color and depth. We are embodied and created beings, we require food and drink and fellowship. We know our Lord in the sharing of a cup and in the breaking of bread, as his own disciples did time and time again. In that way, Jesus does mean to be taken literally. Brothers and Sisters, when you put on a meal, do not simply invite those who can best appreciate your creativity in the kitchen, or those who you hope will invite you to their decadent table in the future. Jesus is telling us in all sincerity that we are to invite the poor, the sick, the crippled, and the blind to our common table, and we are to FEED THEM. We are to feed God's beloved children with good food, with ample refreshments and with pleasant company. We are to show hospitality not just to those we see as "our own" but to those who are closest to God's own heart, and not to assume ourselves to belong at the head of the table. This is physical, visceral, incarnate hospitality.

But there's even more to it than that.

Beyond the simple food of the Sabbath meal, or the Labor Day picnic, we have been given the bread of life. Every day that we live in and as the body of Christ, we are participating in an eternal banquet that is already here and not yet come. Our very LIVES are a banquet, a wedding feast. We ourselves are called as Christ's body in the world to invite those who do not know him to the table of our Lord. Those in this world who have been made poor by systems not built for them, those in this world who have been made blind by sin and greed, those who

have been crippled by injuries inflicted on them in the name of God's church—these are they whom we must invite into our lives. These are the guests that we must call forward, to the places of honor in our hearts, closest to the Father. In doing this, we place ourselves on the margins, at the back of the line, in the lowest place at the table. But our God remembers his promise of mercy. When the kingdom comes, we will not have to wait for our host to call us up higher. He will already be seated at our side.