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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 14: 1, 7-14

As I lay the fork near the plate, let me remember this is Your table, not mine. As I set the water glasses down and fold the napkins, let me be reminded that every setting at this table is Yours, not mine.” Gunilla Norris, “Setting the Table”

### **“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”**

My sermon title is, of course, a shameless lift from the 1967 movie starring Sydney Poitier, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. For those of you who don’t know the movie, it’s about a young woman who brings her fiancé home to meet her parents. Dr. John Prentice, the fiancé, is a catch by anyone’s standard: tall, handsome, educated, a doctor, well spoken, comes from a fine family. Except there’s one catch: he’s black. That catch puts the woman’s relatively liberal parents to the test. Can they put their money where their mouth is and welcome him into the family, or not?

The movie, which revolves around a dinner party, exposes the human tendency to think that we are something that we are not. We often have flaws that go unnoticed until they are revealed in certain situations.

Something similar happens in our Bible story today. Jesus comes to dinner but instead of polite table talk, this dinner conversation probably causes everyone present to wish that they had brought more Roloids.

When our story for today opens, it’s the Sabbath, and Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. So right away, we know there’s going to be trouble. And Jesus is being watched closely by the Pharisees. They are just waiting for Jesus to make a wrong move.

And Jesus doesn’t disappoint.

First he heals someone, even though it’s illegal to do that on the Sabbath.

And then, when he gets to dinner, he immediately starts telling people where they should and should not sit. “Don’t sit there,” Jesus tells someone. “That’s the place of honor, reserved only for the most distinguished guest. And if you sit there, and you’re not the distinguished guest, the host is going to have to tell you to get up and sit someplace else. And that’s embarrassing, because now you’ve drawn attention to yourself and the fact that you aren’t the guest of honor.

Instead, sit over there, in the cheap seats. You won’t embarrass yourself there. And if it turns out you’re the guest of honor, and the host has to tell you to move, well everyone will think you’re really grand.”

Now, this story resonates with me. Because my family of origin is really funny about seating arrangements. Spouses don't sit with spouses, men and women are equally divided, and if you're seated next to someone quiet you're expected to carry the table conversation. It's a well known fact that you usually know where you rank depending on where you're seated. If you're next to the host or hostess you're in good with the family, if you're seated with the stray girlfriend or boyfriend, not so much. And if you find yourself at the place setting with the old fork with the handle the dog chewed years and years ago, all bets are off.

Even though they're a bit odd, for my family these seating arrangements make sense. They make just as much sense as the seating arrangements for the guests at Jesus' party. In Jesus' day guests generally sat on couches that were shaped in U. If you were seated within the U, you were a guest of honor. But the further away you got, the less status you had.

So, Jesus' advice made sense to the guests. He's not saying anything new or particularly radical, then or now. We still have head tables at weddings and banquets and award dinners, and that's fine. I don't think Jesus is telling us not to have those. Jesus is simply giving practical advice to people as to how they should conduct themselves. After all, no one wants to embarrass themselves, right?

But after warming them up with nice, practical advice, he throws them a real zinger. "Oh, about that guess list," he says, almost as if it's an afterthought, though clearly it's not, "By inviting your friends and family and your neighbors who are in your social class, you have made sure that you have lost nothing, risked nothing, spent nothing, ultimately, sacrificed nothing, and actually done nothing that qualifies you as a host in the spiritual sense of the word. You have invited only people who can afford to return the favor and invite you to their house and feed you there. This is a nice social event, its good fellowship, but it's not real hospitality." (Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton)

That's what Jesus is telling the people in today's story.

God's desire that we show others hospitality is a common theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament showing hospitality was a cultural norm. And in the NT it's also of central importance. In fact, there are more meal scenes in the gospel of Luke than in any other Gospel. And important things happened at those meals. Jesus did a lot of teaching over food. And if we're paying attention, we learn from these stories that hospitality in the Bible is not what we think it is. We typically understand hospitality as a willingness to host, feed, and entertain a guest, something we all do and especially with our personal friends. However, in the Bible, showing hospitality means hosting, feeding and entertaining people who can't repay you, or who look nothing like you, or who aren't as educated as you, or who come from the different side of the tracks.

An example of showing Biblical hospitality: there's a guy who dresses as a woman who lives in the trailer park behind the church who cuts through the church property every day

I assume to catch the bus on Clayton Road. For years I've seen him do this; for years I thought he was a she.

To show this guy/gal Biblical hospitality means we will go out of our way to invite him to church and when he/she arrives we will treat him just like we would treat any other person, including the person sitting in the pew next to you right now.

That's biblical hospitality. And if the thought of that makes you slightly uncomfortable, or you're not sure you could do it, or if the suggestion that we should do that doesn't sit well with you, then you get the parable.

John Dominic Crossan once said you know you understand the parable if you say to yourself, "I'm not sure what it means, but I know I don't like it."

Friends, the greatest crisis the early church faced was who one sat with. On the surface that may sound ludicrous, but we're still having the debate. We argue about who can and cannot get married, or who is or is not allowed into leadership (particularly ordained), or who may or may not come to the table. Christians are still at it, after all these years. Still arguing about who is in and who is out when Jesus makes it perfectly clear that *all are in*. And not only that, but the people who we think don't deserve a seat at the table, deserve the very best seat.

Now I realize this is difficult for some of us to digest, because most of us here are used to sitting at some pretty decent seats, if not some of the best seats.

But there are people who don't have any seat; or who sit in the bad seats all the time, and not because they want to or deserve to, but because people never invite them to have a seat.

In Jesus' day there were people who were not allowed to worship, people whom you could not touch or associate with without becoming unclean yourself. And these are the people whom Jesus calls us to invite to the banquet.

Who are the poor, the crippled, the lame and blind among us? Who are the strangers in our midst in need of hospitality? Who has God placed in our path for us to pay attention to? Who are the people who are not here, who aren't at the table, but should be invited? Who are we hesitant to invite? Friends, welcoming someone who is different from us clearly presents challenges, because Sunday mornings are still the most segregated time in America—and not only racially, but socio-economically too.

Today, Jesus invites us to the table, a table at which he is the host. At this table, there is room for all sorts of people, tall and small, comfortable, and not so comfortable. And when we come to the table, we leave behind in the pew our power or position. We come and hold out our hands, willing to receive whatever God has to give us.

We come and God gives to us the bread of life, the host, the food which changes us from strangers into friends, and indeed transforms us so that we can be friends to strangers.

*And we return to our pews as new people; and from our pews we are sent forth into the world to seek and save those who, like us, are seekers and strangers upon the earth.*

*Who are the strangers, the aliens, the lame, the blind, the poor? They are us, and they are all those in the world who, like us, stand in need of the love of Christ!*

In the movie "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?", Sydney Poitier goes to his fiancé's parents to tell them they won't get married, because he doesn't want to cause any trouble. But he says an interesting thing in that scene. He tells them, about their daughter, "Our color difference doesn't matter to her; in fact, she doesn't think there is a difference."

Friends, that is what Christ expects from us.

Amen.

### Setting the Table

As I lay the fork near the plate,  
Let me remember this is Your table, not mine.  
As I set the water glasses down  
And fold the napkins, let me be reminded  
That every setting at this table is Yours, not mine.

Each one who will partake of this meal  
Is a particular someone You love, a someone  
You have made and whom You sustain.  
In You nothing and no one is forgotten.  
How vast and providential is the memory  
With which You keep us all.

It is only we who forget You  
And then one another.  
It is we who starve each other  
And exclude each other.  
Give me new eyes.  
When the glass is raised by my friend  
Let me see You drinking.  
When the fork is lifted by my child,  
Let me recognize You eating.

You are the hidden joy which feeds  
And keeps everything. You are the table,  
The guest, the meal,  
and the commemoration.

Make in my person a place setting for You.  
Remind me of my true nature  
Which is recalled only in you.

Gunilla Norris from *Being Home: A Book of Meditations On the Incarnation*

