

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus names a lot of binaries: between sitting at the place of honor and sitting at the lowest place, between those who are honored and those who are disgraced, between those who will be exalted and those who will be humbled. But to go beyond simply naming these binaries, I want us to think about how the experience of the wedding banquet and the Sabbath meal would have been different for the people on either end of the spectrum, how the entire experience of reality would have been different for those who occupied these rigid binaries, and for those who existed outside of them.

In Jesus' time, a wedding banquet would have taken place around a U-shaped table, with people reclining on dining couches. The host would assign each guest a seat at the table that demonstrated their status or social standing, with guests of honor sitting closer to the host and those with less social status sitting further away. The host would typically offer a toast to the most important guests, beginning with whoever was seated in the place of honor. So you can imagine that those on either side of this binary would have very different experiences: the person in the place of honor would be preparing to enjoy the most interesting conversation, surrounded by other equally high status people, with the full admiration of everyone else present, knowing that their current seat would only further cement their status, their wealth, their opportunity for the future. In contrast, the person in the lowest place would be surrounded by others of lower status, would not be looked at

with admiration or interest, would know that their current seat only further cements the idea that they are one of the least important people in this room. The type of person who would have sat in the place of honor at a wedding banquet would likely have moved through society in a certain way, had opportunities and wealth and access that would have been out-of-reach for the person seated in the lowest seat. Though they are at the same banquet, they are not only having two different experiences but they are living in two completely different realities, with different levels of importance and worth granted to them by society.

And what about those who exist beyond the binary of the highest and lowest seat at the table? What about those who were never even given a seat at the table in the first place? In verses 12-14, Jesus names how there are those that Roman society considered not even worth inviting—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—all groups that would've been socially and religiously marginalized during Jesus' time. We can imagine that they were also living in an entirely different reality than those who were at the wedding banquet, a reality that told them they had no value at all, a reality that told them they didn't deserve a seat at the table.

And doesn't that sound familiar? Our world is one that's becoming increasingly divided, and it sometimes feels like we are living in entirely different realities. There are those who can afford to buy their way out of inconveniences that many others are forced to endure. There are those who can afford private access to the best medical care, while others have to endure long lines at the ER, while still others are rejected entirely because they have no medical insurance. There are those who can afford elite

education while others attend overcrowded and underfunded schools, while still others are forced to miss school to work long hours to support their families. There are those who can afford to buy their dream home, while others are forced to rent, while still others are unhoused. Just as in Jesus' time, our society today has such rigid hierarchies that it leaves people experiencing entirely different realities, with unequal access to choices, to opportunities, and even to one another. So often, those with the wealth to invite others to the banquet simply invite those who already have enough, which only works to reinforce the same hierarchies. So often, we find ourselves at tables where everyone looks like us, lives like us, and thinks like us, which only deepens our divide. So often, we realize that we are no longer sitting at the same table at all, that perhaps we were never even invited to the table in the first place.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus comes into this world of rigid hierarchies, of different realities and divided tables and makes a new world possible. He sees all of the guests who are vying for the place of honor, who are reproducing the broken systems of their world, and says *there is another way*. At the end of the parable he tells them "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." If you read this verse in the original Greek, you'll notice that grammatically the author of Luke uses what's called the future tense and divine passive here, which means that Jesus isn't just speaking about what's going to happen, he's specifically speaking about what **God will do**. With this understanding, Jesus' parable becomes a radical, theological statement about the ways that God is actively working to overturn the expectations of our world and to create the Kingdom of God. Our God is not simply a God that watches from on high as our

societal status dictates our value. Our God is not simply a God that watches from a distance as our wealth keeps us apart from one another, keeps us living in different realities. No, our God is a God who intervenes, who creates a new reality where our worth is not based on status or wealth, but on grace. Our God is a God who humbles the exalted and exalts the humbled to show that our place at the table is not conditional but is a free gift of God's grace that God gives us again and again and again.

And Jesus goes further into this radical breaking open of systems when he tells those gathered for the Sabbath meal that they are called not only to invite those who would invite them in return, but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, to invite those who are marginalized by society and have no chance to repay them. Jesus' direction here is revolutionary good news because it overturns the Greco-Roman expectation that only those who have something to give are worthy of invitation. It is revolutionary good news because it overturns a system that separates us from one another, that keeps us surrounded by those who are the same as us, that reinforces society's hierarchies rather than breaking them open. It is revolutionary good news because this invitation is the same one that we hear each week when Jesus bids us to come to the communion table.

Each week we come to the communion table knowing that we could never earn our place and yet God saves one especially for us anyway. We come to the table in community, alongside people all over the world and throughout time and space, knowing that at the communion table we are equal before God. We are equally fed, equally seen, equally beloved. Because even though society places us on different ends of binaries, even though the world

creates different realities for us based on wealth or status or ability, at the communion table God makes a new reality possible: one where all are welcomed, all are worthy, all are nourished and loved and renewed, not because of what we have but because of God's radical, unconditional love for us.

And it is in this invitation, this gift of grace that nurtures and nourishes us, that God frees us to extend the invitation. But let me be clear: in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is not simply calling us toward charity. Charity is important and yet it often assumes that the one giving has nothing to learn and the one receiving has nothing to offer. It is important and yet it often reinforces the same social hierarchies that Jesus is speaking against here. It is important and yet it can often reinforce our own sense of reality.

Instead, Jesus is calling us toward something much more radical and life-giving. He's calling those at the Sabbath meal and all of us today toward true fellowship with others. When he tells everyone to invite those who cannot repay, he's calling each of us to invite those who occupy entirely different societal positions, entirely different worlds, entirely different realities, not with the intention to serve them, but to eat alongside them. When he tells everyone to sit down at the lowest place, he is calling each and every one of us to be willing to set aside our own reality and enter into another's, to imagine that we might have something to learn from one another, even when we disagree. When he tells everyone to give a banquet, he's calling each of us into true community and mutuality. True community and mutuality is messy and chaotic and exhilarating and restorative because even as it breaks open our own notions of reality in ways that can feel scary, it also

breaks open all the powers of this world that separate us from God and one another. True community and mutuality is hard and its work and yet it's joyful and lifegiving because it gives us glimpses of the Kingdom of God here and now, a Kingdom where all are equally fed and valued and loved. The true community and mutuality Jesus invites us into is radical and life-saving good news because it means that we do not have to accept the scarcity and exclusion, the rigid binaries and divided realities of this world as the final word. We do not have to accept them because, through Christ, God is already at work creating a new reality. Through Christ, God is already at work humbling the exalted and exalting the humbled. Through Christ, God is already at work expanding the banquet table so that all may come and eat. And by God's incredible grace, we are not just invited to this feast, we are called to help set the table. So come, take a seat. There is a place for all.