

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Table Service

A sermon preached on September 2, 2007, by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Luke 14:1 *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. 14:7-24* When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." ¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' ¹⁹ Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' ²⁰ Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²² And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³ Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Wikipedia defines Murphy's Law as, "Whatever can go wrong will go wrong, and at the worst possible time, in the worst possible way." As an example, the encyclopedia could present the wedding of an acquaintance of mine as an illustration. She swears that the following details are factual.

The wedding was conceived as a large, extravagant affair, with many bridesmaids and groomsmen and a lengthy invitation list. The first sign that this meticulously-planned affair was not going to go well was when fingernail polish remover was spilled on one of the bridesmaid's dresses. The synthetic material instantly dissolved under this acetone assault, of course, and left a gaping chemical hole in the organza. The wedding service was delayed while the dressmaker hastily put a tuck in all the bridesmaids' dresses in order to make them look like the repaired one.

The second sign of Murphy's at work involved a dog which happened to be wandering the church yard just as the bride and her attendants were approaching the church door. Trotting right up to the bride, no doubt in a mood to congratulate her with doggy kisses, he jumped up and left muddy smears on her gown.

The fourth indication of Murphy working overtime happened later that evening when the groom insisted on carrying the bride across the threshold of their hotel room. Swooping her into his arms and simultaneously shoving open the door with a foot, he swiveled the bride's head into the door frame necessitating a trip to the emergency room and several stitches.

I skipped disaster three because it is the best and leads us back to our scriptural theme for the day (yes, friends, there is a sermon in here somewhere). It so happened that another large wedding was occurring in town that day and many people in the community had received invitations to both ceremonies. Many people worked out the conflict by attending the service for one couple and the reception of the second. Consequently, relatively few showed up for my friend's wedding party which was held at a swanky country club. A ton of food was left over and, rather than throwing it away, my friend's mother phoned a local homeless shelter to tell them they could have the food if they could come and pick it up. Something got garbled in the message, as Murphy's would dictate, and instead of sending someone to pick up the food, the homeless shelter sent the homeless out to the country club to eat.

So, here we are back to Jesus' parable. There, too, many were invited but few came. So those who finally gathered around the table were not relatives, friends, and neighbors, not business associates and fellow members of the club, but the poor, the lame, the powerless, and the otherwise left out.

How strange the gospel is. The comedy of my friend's wedding reflects the social order Jesus commands his followers to practice. How strange the gospel is – upside-down and inside-out, a funhouse mirror image of life as we actually live it. Is Jesus joking?

The party is planned. All the "right" people are invited; the table groans with excess. An atmosphere of cozy smugness hovers over this gathering of the proud, the well-connected, the invited, the odor of their blessedness rising with the steam off the meat. And in the midst of their cozy smugness, Jesus says, "Where are the poor? Where are the rest of God's people? Where are the folks who never have a place at society's table?"

In case you ever get into an argument with someone who haughtily insists they obey all God's commandments, it would be fun for you to point them to this story from Luke and ask when was the last time they obeyed this particular commandment. Ask them when was the last time they supported political change to bring about access and power to those who have little or none. Ask them where and how it is we have subverted conventional social norms and begun paying attention to the people Jesus welcomes to his table.

We are generally pretty good at the "thou shalt not murder" kind of commandment. Most of us don't steal, commit adultery, and steal. But we are mostly abject failures when it comes to those areas of life which have to do with radically rethinking our relationship to our wealth and to the powerless.

We are great successes and highly adept at practicing the conventions our society dictates. We know good manners, we know how to be cordial and neighborly. But what Jesus is commanding here is an etiquette to make Latitia Baldrige blanch. The plain command of Jesus is to practice humility, to accept the lower places, to share with the poor instead of rewarding the rich, to establish a manner of life that guarantees feasts for those who have nothing and cannot repay instead of maintaining the machinery of privilege.

Who has a place at our tables? None of us, except by inadvertence, invites into our homes folks we don't know. Rather, we invite family and friends, those who are like us and share our values and our status. In this kind of world there is risk – even danger

– to opening ourselves to surprise guests; trust is a serious issue of safety. On the other hand, we know, if we are to climb socially and expand our relationships and participate in privilege, there are hoops to jump and dues to pay and secret codes to know so that the right people are sitting next to the right guests with the right menu served on the best china. Anthropologist Peter Farb says that, “to know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.”

What about society’s table, however? What about *table* as a symbol of privilege and access to the blessings of society? What about *table* as a way of raising the issue of fragmentation in society around class and race, around power and wealth, around justice and fairness and the dignity of persons?

Jesus knew the character of the society in which he lived, and he wanted to change it. To put a finer, and narrower, point on it, Jesus knew the character of our human hearts and that is what he wants to change! To do so he addresses our most cherished certainties about what we think makes us worthy and respectable and accepted. You see, we think it is our skill that saves us, that it is our knowledge that makes us well, and it is our finesse with the social niceties gives us membership in that part of the human community to which we aspire. And, indeed, the rules of social class are strict and to be ignorant of them quickly establishes us as bumpkins of the lowest rank.

But what are the rules of the kingdom of God? The pecking order seems different. We are commanded to dethrone restrictive social codes which we have made into our idols of respectability. Indeed, he demands that we dethrone respectability itself as a god.

To us it may seem that Jesus is getting things backwards. We sense instinctively that his insistence that it should be the poor and lame whom we invite to a feast, instead of the rich and sleek, and the stranger we should welcome, instead of friends, threatens to uproot us from what sustains us, namely the comforts of being with like-minded, value-sharing, right-thinking individuals who look a lot like us. And thus class distinctions perpetuate, social orders perpetuate, social codes remain fixed, and Sunday morning worship in most churches remains proof that the poor aren’t invited to the table.

While we live according to social codes, Jesus seeks to help us live according to grace, the wholesome, integrating power of God to gather our bifurcated hearts and divided minds into one person whom God loves. The men gathered at the Pharisee’ banquet, like us, lived divided lives. They well knew the Law which required them to tithe ten percent of their wealth to help the poor. And, they knew the conventions which spelled out for them what they needed to do to be accepted in society. They knew how to be charitable in a limited kind of way and social in a fulsome kind of way. They were at two with themselves. And Jesus looked at them and noticed the twist in their hearts and told them that what life was about was being aligned with God’s grace which flowed out of a healed heart toward any and all in need, that altruism should not be a small portion of life but the whole of life, and that a charitable tithe is the price we pay for being able to live only for ourselves. On a surface level of meaning, Jesus dethrones the god of social convention. At the deeper level, Jesus dethrones the god of the self, saying that what we were created for was to be one human community, gathered around one table, and that grace is what makes this possible.

“Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God,” one anonymous voice cries out at the sumptuous feast where Jesus was guest and where he delivered his criticism of the very banquet he was attending. Whoever spoke that line got the message: blessed is anyone, blessed is everyone, for those who are welcome at the table in God’s kingdom are those called from prestigious hallways and backwater byways, from the classy and déclassé, the hearty and the heartsick.

One of the ways Murphy's Law works is to remind us that we are not in charge. Our finely-honed plans and dreams are not what works in the scheme of things. We live in God's world, after all, where up is down and last is first and the poor in spirit inherit. In God's kingdom the poor receive good news, the blind can see, and the dead are raised. Jesus calls us to make a choice in whose world and in which we reality we want to live. In God's world everyone has a place at the table. It's an invitation and a command we dare not decline.