

The Gospel of Luke 14.1-24: Jesus & Humility | Luke Knight

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Last week we were treated to Elyse's teaching on this passage, and we're so thankful for her time and quality insight. My job this week is to ride on her coattails, as we're looking at the same passage today. The reason we're covering this passage twice is there's so much to chew on and we want to enjoy more of the meal.

Speaking of eating, you'll notice that Luke 14 carries a lot of language about dinner parties, in fact language set at a *dinner party itself* which Jesus attends. Which is something you see across the gospels. Jesus is very happy to liken the good news he brings as to a lavish feast given by a generous host, which says a good deal about what God's like and what we might expect from him. If we imagine God as a cold or stingy character, we should listen more closely to Jesus. What's God and his kingdom like? A dinner party, where you're invited to eat and drink your fill, with no expense spared by the host. So one of the unavoidable messages that comes through the gospels is, "pull up a chair, there's plenty to eat, somebody is waiting to warmly welcome you!" This is why at the heart many Christian communities food is taken seriously and joyfully – it says an awful lot about what God's like, often countering the cheap or cruel picture we might carry around in our back pockets. It's also why many Christian groups over the years have felt that the best way to make the gospel truly heard is by ringing the dinner bell. "Taste and see that the Lord is good." It's why our church hosts things like Alpha, or our Men's food Life Group, or seniors lunch, the Table for Young Adults, or even Trunk or Treat for neighbourhood kids. What's God like? Kind and generous, so his people should follow suit and put on a spread – even if it's candy for families hungry for a sense of community, thirsty even, for the life Jesus gives.

As Elyse shared last week, this episode takes place at a meal to which Jesus is invited on the Sabbath. Like in chapter 13, Jesus again heals someone on the fringes, with Luke adding that Jesus was being watched closely. Notice the meal is hosted by a *prominent Pharisee*, with some experts in the Mosaic Law there too. So Jesus isn't facing a village synagogue leader, as he was in the previous chapter, but is sitting down to dinner with some heavy hitters, Israel's elite leadership. A similar point is made in both stories of healing: Israel's leadership is concerned with maintaining status quo, and they're missing their very God among them in Jesus, who is brimming with healing and hope. God's turning up and they're tuning out, too focused on the checks and balances they think will free and bless them. But Jesus not only turns up to do what regulations can't – which is to bring *life* – but to show the experts that they've missed the heart of the Law altogether if they're willing to let human regulation override human dignity.

This kind of run in, between Jesus and Israel's leadership, is no more awkward than when he's invited to a dinner party, because as we might know, dinner parties are an etiquette mine-field. Protocol can be subtle, but there's always a custom. *Should I bring a dish or flowers? Can I eat what they serve? Who sits where? How long are we meant to stay? Why have they invited me? Who do they really want here, and who's here to fill out the roster?* There are endless questions and customs to consider – embarrassing and awkward stories abound. It was the same in Jesus' day, even more so when it came to eating at a first century Jewish table. And it's around a table like this Jesus goes back and forth with other guests about what God and his kingdom is like.

I have on good authority that her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II had a cheeky sense of humour. She was once hosting a weekend house party for some of the British aristocracy. Not a dinner where common people who'd done remarkable things were invited, but a gathering of real blue-bloods and higher-ups. The story goes that at one point during the party she got up from tea and wandered out into the garden. Since the custom was that the group goes where the Queen goes, everyone got up and followed. To everyone's shock the Queen then dropped her to knees and started *weeding*. And because the custom was also for everyone

to do what the Queen was doing, the higher-ups had to follow suit, and starting weeding too. The only explanation to this strange little story is that the Queen worried when people got a bit high on themselves, and used her cheeky sense of humour to hit the odd point home. *Nice suit. I wonder how well it preforms as a gardening outfit?* We're also told the Queen had a personal faith in Jesus, and it's funny because something about this story smacks of him.

As we heard, this passage holds two stories told at one party. The first story, the scholars tell us, sounds like *advice* about social mobility and humility, when really it's all about assumptions in the kingdom of God. The point is simple: ***you can't be a snob in the kingdom of God.*** Jesus arrives for the meal and notices people jostling for the best seats, finding subtle or not so subtle ways to self-promote. This was a real problem in the first Christian communities to which Luke writes this biography of Jesus. When people became Christians, they didn't automatically become just like Jesus. They had been born and bread into societal hierarchies, had race relations to navigate, assumptions about the sexes, and traditions about who mattered who didn't, who had power and who didn't. And the first Christians had as hard a time with this as we do. So Jesus sits a dinner table filled with conventions and assumptions and people jostling for position, and says that in God's kingdom those who elevate themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be elevated. *What does he mean?* Is he kicking off a strange new game of whoever's the humblest wins? Not quite. As we said, this is less a bit of social advice as it is about God's kingdom and our assumptions. To the first century Jewish audience – who might have *assumed* they were extra-favoured by God, well beyond other groups, and so *deserved* the best "seats in the house" – Jesus says: sorry, nope! As with other stories Jesus tells in Luke's gospel – like the parable of workers in the field, or even the parable of the prodigal son – he repeats often that the good news of the kingdom is for everyone and comes with equal accessibility. So if you think you deserve more or are positioned better because you're a man, or a have a kind of social standing, or racial background, or education, or vocation...look out, you're in for a rude awakening in the kingdom of God. The door is narrow, but you don't get through on merits or privilege, you get through because you've thrown yourself at the mercy of a generous host, knowing that you've got precious little to offer. So, says Jesus, arrogance and positioning won't fly at God's table. And if we get into that kind of thing, we'll be in for a real shock. ***Guests can't be a snobs at God's table.*** *Which is bad news for snobs, good news for everyone else.* The questions is, which am I? How hot and bothered do I get when I'm asked to start weeding in my freshly pressed suit?

The second story is connected, but is less about how the kingdom of God works, though it is in a way, but is meant also as reminder to Christians of *what kind of community* they must become. God's the generous host, inviting Israel into the kingdom he's enacting through Jesus, and as Jesus experiences often, the invitations are shrugged off for various reasons. The story goes on to infer that the invite is less about the importance or position of the guest than it is about the character of the host who wants to fill his house. You could say this story is a good picture of the whole of Luke's gospel, as we see Jesus' many times snubbed by his Israel's leadership, but embraced by some at the time thought to be useless, untouchable, forgettable. Jesus wants them all. So in this story Jesus says that God's filling his table with anyone who will admit their need and entrust themselves to him – all people can be God's people. That's why our Living Waters has a team of volunteers who go into a local prison with the gospel of Jesus; it's why we're trying to put roots down in Willoughby through the English Conversation Club; why we think teenagers are worth investment. It's why we can't afford as God's family to be satisfied with a cute little church in a pleasant little town. God wants the house filled with folks who'll admit their hunger and accept the invitation, no matter their history or situation.

But the story deals a second punch, as again we know Luke is writing to some of the first Christian communities. This isn't just a story about who is welcome in God's kingdom, and how this happened through Jesus' life, but it's also a kick in the pants to these first Christian communities about how they operate. If the first story says ***guests can't be a snobs at God's table***, then the second story follows by saying, as one writer puts it, the in the ***kingdom of God the guests must also become hosts.***ⁱ

A number of years ago I was invited to join a small team heading to a restricted access country in support of long-term missionaries. It was a risky trip, the first of its kind in our network, so we had to come together for a few days from across Canada for some specialized training. Around the cultural, safety and language work, we also had to eat. Our team leader worked hard for a couple of days, making us breakfast lunch and dinner – he seemed like a decent guy to follow. Then all of a sudden, somewhere around the second night, he stopped. There he sat with his feet up, no dinner made. Five o'clock. We all chatted a while in the living room. Five-thirty – no movement from the leader. We hung out more – quarter to six. Still nothing. I don't remember who, but around six o'clock someone asked, "so what's going on with dinner?", to which he shrugged

and said, "I guess someone should make it", and just stared at us blankly. And that's when we realized we were in the middle of a really awkward team building exercise. Eventually we made our way into the kitchen to figure out what to make, who would take on what task, and so on. I won't tell you when dinner finally got to the table (because it's embarrassing) but I'll never forget the conversation that followed. Our team leader said, *"Look, I know that was awkward, but if we're going to be a team we need to be a team. So this can't be about me taking care of you over there. Before tonight you all assumed I'd handle everything, but there might be time when I can't, and besides this trip is a team effort, and we all need to make it work."* At that point we no longer saw ourselves as recipients only, but felt the expectation and inspiration to be participants. ***In the kingdom of God, the guests also become the hosts.***

One of the great surprises to many people who choose to follow Jesus is that we actually have to actually *follow* Jesus. Christianity isn't a subscription or download. It takes involvement. We've enrolled in Jesus' way of life, we're charged to have Jesus' attitude, to invite who he'd invite, serve who he'd serve. In the kingdom of God, ***the guests become hosts.*** We are all of us servants of the master and his marching orders are not to discriminate about who we invite or how we serve. The challenge is we're very good at discrimination. We have endless ways of ducking and diving, picking and choosing. We've been taught to believe that there is such a thing as "our kind of people", and we can curate anyone we like out of existence if they don't fit the mould. *They're not cool enough, not socially savvy enough, don't seem like an up and comer. You know I just don't think they are my kind of brand.* But things are different at God's table. You don't know who you'll end up sitting next to, and the standards are higher. So we have to get over ourselves, break our unspoken rules, let go of assumptions and judgements about who matters and who doesn't – because the last will be first, the first will be last, and the streets are filled with all kinds of people God wants to feed. **The guests, who have tasted the kindness and goodness, must become the hosts.**

In the story Jesus tells about the house being filled, the servant is told to go and invite the unwanted of the time, and after that to go invite the unknown characters on the road, the strangers and maybe even the dangers. That's our charge too. This kind of thing, friends, goes beyond activities staged by our church; beyond strategies or buzzwords. It's about our character, our attitude as a group. It's about taking a risk on someone, not hiding in our phones. It's about *our* homes, *our* Life Groups, *our* neighbours, the strangers God puts in our path.

I want to say two things in closing, first to the person on the fringes, wondering if you're wanted by God or by us. *You are wanted.* It might be messy, but if you've grabbed on to Jesus, we'll hold you too. We're all here because we were invited by the generous host, and we'll do our very best to avoid snobbery and preferential treatment, even if we need reminding now and then not to be jerks. So if you're on the edge of going all in on Jesus and faith, accept the invitation, go all in. You know you're hungry, Jesus will serve you, and we will too.

And to those of us who've been at the party for a while, let us not assume we're any more suited for a place now than we were before we walked in. We're all guests on equal footing, which is really good news! You were once lost, but now you're found. So taste *again* and see that the Lord is good, enjoy the feast of grace and community. And, friends, let's not close the door. Let's not assume God's happy with the turn out, *there's more room.* More than that, let's go this week, not resting on our laurels, but on the front foot, liberally sharing the message from our master: "come in, everything is now ready."
(let's stand and sing this song in closing)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How does snobbery present itself in Christian communities? What about it is dangerous to the message of the gospel a church should carry?
- Share a story of how a guest became a host, invite you deeper into the family of God.
- What sorts of things should we prioritize if we are to represent God's table rightly? As family units / households, as individuals, as a church?

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke For Everyone* (Biblical study tool)