

God's Measure of Worth

Luke 14:1-14

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Prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds that we might receive with open hearts whatever you speak to us this day. Amen.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is at a dinner party hosted by a prominent Pharisee. The Pharisees were known for their strict observance of the Law of Moses. Jesus, a respected rabbi, was invited as an important guest. And as he often does, he uses this moment as a teaching opportunity—even though he knows the Pharisees are watching him closely.

But they weren't just curious. They were looking for a reason to challenge him. They had already seen him heal on the Sabbath, the day of rest when no work was to be done. Twice before, he had broken their rules in their eyes: first by healing a man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6-10), then a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17). And now it happens again. On the Sabbath, Jesus heals a man suffering from edema— a painful swelling from trapped fluid. Once again, Jesus is on a collision course with the religious leaders.

He confronts them directly: *"Does the Law allow healing on the Sabbath or not?"* Then he makes it personal: *"Suppose your child or even your ox fell into a ditch on the Sabbath. Wouldn't you pull it out right away?"*

And they were speechless because they had no answer.

So, what is Jesus teaching? **Human need takes precedence over the Sabbath. Human need comes before ritual observance.** The Sabbath was meant as a gift of rest and renewal, not a law that prevents compassion. By healing, Jesus shows that caring for people takes priority over following rules for their own sake.

Now, it's easy to dismiss the Pharisees as villains. But remember: they were deeply devoted to God's law. They treasured the Sabbath as a sacred gift. In their eyes, healing was only allowed if life was in danger. Since this man's condition wasn't life-threatening, Jesus's choice challenged everything they believed about obedience. They must have wondered why Jesus couldn't just wait until the Sabbath was over—maybe the next day or even an hour after sundown—to heal the man?

But here's the point: it wasn't a choice between good and evil. It was a choice between two good things—honoring the Sabbath and helping someone in need. Jesus chose compassion. Not because the Sabbath was unimportant, but because people matter most. Caring for others is fundamental to our faith. As the Letter of James says, "True religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering..." (James 1:27).

After addressing the leaders, Jesus turns to the guests. He notices how they scramble for the best seats at the table. Status mattered at these banquets. To get a feel for what was happening, first, let me ask you. What is the shape of your dining table at home? Rectangular? Round? If your table is rectangular, who sits at the head of both ends—your mom or dad? And who sits next to mom or dad? Does the seating arrangement indicate age, from oldest to youngest?

But imagine if you had a U-shaped dining table, like you see in some conference rooms. The seating arrangement wasn't random; it was all about status. In Jesus' time, people often ate at U-shaped tables called a *triclinium*, especially in Roman-influenced Jewish homes and at formal banquets. These tables were more than just furniture—they marked social order. The host sat at the center, with the most honored guests placed close by. The nearer you were to the middle of the "U," the more important you were. Those seated at the far ends were clearly lower in rank. Guests reclined on their left side as food was served. These dinners were not only about eating; they often included conversation and teaching, much like the Greco-Roman symposium. As we might imagine, everyone wanted to sit near the middle.

Seeing this, Jesus tells a parable, well, more like an ethical instruction actually. *"When you're invited to a wedding, don't take the place of honor. Someone more distinguished may arrive, and you'll be asked to move down in shame. Instead, choose the lowest seat. Then the host may say, 'Friend, move up higher,' and you'll be honored before everyone."*

But this isn't just clever social advice. Jesus isn't teaching us how to win the game of honor. He's teaching humility. The word for "honor" is usually translated as "glory." Jesus is saying true honor is never grabbed—it is given and ultimately belongs to God. And genuine humility isn't pretending to be lowly so you'll be noticed. It comes from knowing your worth is secure in God's love, not in anyone else's opinion.

So, that's Jesus' sort of *Emily Post Table Etiquette* if you're a guest. But Jesus also has a *Guide to Dinner Parties* for the hosts. And now he gets even more direct. "*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends, relatives, or rich neighbors. They may invite you back, and you'll be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.*"

Man, that's bold! There's nothing transactional here—no rule about anything that smacks of *quid pro quo*. "I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine." He's very clear on this: **don't invite people to dinner just to get something from them.** It's not a business transaction.

But there's a bigger purpose for Jesus here. He's confronting the Roman patronage system. He gets political, if you will. In that world, dinners weren't just about food or friendship. They were about power and obligation. If a wealthy patron invited you, you owed them loyalty or service. A meal, therefore, came with strings attached.

But Jesus says: not so in God's kingdom. Don't invite people just to benefit yourself. Open your table to those who cannot repay. Hospitality should not depend on status. It should mirror God's generosity—free, unconditional, open to all. For Jesus, God's measure of worth differs from the Roman patronage system because in God's kingdom, greatness is measured by humility, honor is given to those who don't seek it, and hospitality is extended to those who can't pay it back.

And that brings us to today. We still live in a world that values people for their usefulness, for what they can contribute, their influence, their wealth. But Jesus offers a profoundly different message: every person matters, everyone has a place at the table. Our true worth is secure in God, who loves and welcomes us all, not in anyone else's opinion.

As we embrace this radical inclusion and learn to humble ourselves, we can trust God's faithfulness. One day, we will all find our place at the table of God's kingdom, where every seat is a place of honor, and every guest is welcomed with joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.