



## **The Parable of the Great Feast** **Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14** **Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 28, 2022)**

Lawrence, the third century chief deacon of Rome, was in charge of distributing the wealth of the church to the poor. The Roman authorities ordered him under pain of death to gather the treasures of the church for the emperor. Lawrence immediately went and gathered those who were poor, lame, widowed, and destitute. He is said to have presented them on the palace steps, saying, "Here are the treasures of the church!"

The ancient church was a mixed bag of people from all walks of life. People from different segments of society found themselves part of the same house-church community. This could, understandably, create some tension. To address this issue the church began using sibling titles like "brother" or "sister" to refer to one another, as they were all siblings in and of Christ. This practice leveled the playing field, constantly reminding them that they were connected as a spiritual family. A central point of this truth comes to us from Luke: do not assume you are more distinguished than anyone else. Worldly hierarchies of social status and economic power have no place in the reign of God.

Jesus loved banquets, so much so that his critics disparaged him as a glutton and a drunkard. He refused the offer of a good meal. In today's gospel, Jesus rescues the value of hospitality from the abhorrent distortion of social stratification and respectability. He is invited to a meal on a Sabbath. He takes the opportunity to teach about the Kingdom of God and its norms. Add to the teaching the mention that it was a Sabbath day, and everybody's ears should perk up.

Luke tells us that they, presumably the Pharisees, "were watching him closely." Well, how do you like being invited to a stranger's house and being scrutinized while you eat? Awkward, isn't it? But this is Jesus, and he doesn't let himself be intimidated. He uses the occasion to share his own observations.

We already know from previous occasions that Jesus enjoyed sharing meals with people from every walk of life, from any class and social status.<sup>1</sup> Reclining at the table, everybody assumed a relaxed position, letting the guard down and becoming more accessible, simple, and vulnerable to one another. This is when conversations have the potential of being pleasantly transparent and people can listen to one another with respect and an honest desire to understand.

Jesus doesn't waste any time and shares a teaching moment with the host and his guests. At a banquet, be humble and polite: do not assume you are more important than others; do not push your weight around; and certainly, do not seek your own glorification. If all you seek is personal

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<sup>1</sup> Just in Luke there are ten recorded meals. See 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-53; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:14-38; 24:28-32; 24:36-43.

recognition and public acclamation, then you risk being embarrassed. There may be someone more important than you and more eligible to the coveted place. You risk being demoted and shamed to a lower status. Why would you want to do that? But more importantly, why do you put your trust in social positioning? What do you really seek? What's important to you? Where do you find your worth? Your success?

God doesn't play that game. A Christian understands that one finds one's worth, joy, and beauty in the fact that one is desired and loved into being by the Creator of all things. You are "fearfully and wonderfully made," says the psalmist.<sup>2</sup> No saint, living or dead, holds a privileged place in the reign of God. All children are equally important in the eyes of God. Because of that, we are all at a place of humility, and all at a place of privilege, in the presence of the Divine.

So, when you have a chance, move away from all that respectability and social positioning game, and choose instead solidarity and inclusivity. Seek out and associate with the least able to repay you: you'll become one with them and God's favor will rest on you as well. In the Beatitudes, blessedness is the condition of those who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, and who endure hatred, exclusion, insult, and defamation on Jesus' account (Luke 6:20–23). Disciples will be blessed when they honor and serve those in need, remaining alert for the return of the Messiah as they continue steadfast in the work of the Gospel (Luke 12:32–44). Eating together can be a living expression of shared humanity.

Wealth, social status, and structural power create attractive and tempting worldly dynamics into which individuals, communities, and social institutions get organized and classified. Jesus himself was tempted in the desert to give in, embrace "the way life is," and gear up for the strife for success, accepting the temptation to get ahead in life even if it should cost him his soul.

Worldly dynamics promote power differentials among people. Various ideals of success (fame, respectability, wealth) become the metrics by which people measure themselves and others. A rat race ensue for what are perceived to be limited resources. Hierarchies, by their very nature, set one above other and/or below others on a ladder structure meant to be climbed to the highest rung. Climbing the success ladder has its own rules, and those who put them together control the outcome, not really interested in fairness. In fact, people are willing to push others around and out of the way in order to gain the highest altitude. Additionally, not everybody starts at the same rung in life. Advantages and disadvantages are baked into the system and passed on generation after generation, sometime unconsciously and without malice.

Jesus is for a reversal of all that. Even before his birth, his mother Mary foretold that reversal in her song of joy to God. We call that song the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-54, especially at v. 51: "He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.") Jesus himself proclaimed to have been empowered by the Spirit of God "to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>3</sup> He has come to build a radically different world, where justice is the foundation, elitism is no more, and tenderness becomes our culture.

Wherever we might find ourselves in life, we are all sitting at a place of privilege: there is always someone worst off than us, physically, emotionally, or socially. Look around, in your neighborhood and here at church. How are we being inclusive of those who are new in our

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 139:14

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-19

midst? When we come to the sanctuary or to the fellowship hall, do we seek familiar faces, or do we sit next to those we never saw before and act as true hosts? If Jesus joined us in person at one of our functions, whom would he ask us to be mindful of? Sitting next to those who are not like us forces us to share (bread, stories, concerns): we become vulnerable, simple, welcoming, and compassionate. Jesus challenges us to act as the Body of Christ and enjoy the diversity that Body is made of.

Jesus notices hierarchies in society. He doesn't give a philosophical and moral lecture on their inappropriateness. If you find yourself in that situation, he seems to say, then stay humble (Luke 14:8-11). But if you are in control of the situation, e.g., you are the host of a party, then make sure you do not abide by the same selfish attitudes of inequality (Luke 14:12-14). That's where you find your blessings: our joy is in God, rather than in wealth and status. How can we use our position, knowledge, resources, and human relations to make the world a better place for all?

In an economy of scarcity, one must generate and protect one's wealth within a tightly controlled inner circle of like-minded people. Power is employed to protect one's possession and to increase them. Nothing wrong with that unless it becomes hoarding, and the wealth increase is obtained through less than transparent and honest means.

Jesus asserts that blessedness comes, foremost, from generosity toward those who have neither the resources nor the ability to repay. Perhaps we may observe this truth from the world of science. When a tree, animal, or human body is healthy, nutrients flow to all parts of the body. But when a group of cells clusters and encloses itself, growing by drawing in resources without any regard for the health of the body, we call that cancer. Real wealth comes from sharing.

Jesus turns our world upside down. God is the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. Because there is no end to the game of who is "in" and who is "out," God in his wisdom knows that our anxious striving for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more jealousy, and more hatred. God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are already welcome, already loved, already cherished. The currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear.

Moving beyond calculated reciprocity in power relations, let us be transformed as we pursue the ministry of the Gospel with loving humility, promoting not ourselves but the extravagant grace of God. Amen.