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THE INVITED AND INVITING CHURCH

Luke 14:1-14; Proper 17C-Pentecost 12C; August 30-31, 2025

Last week I heard a presentation by our District mission executive, Pastor Vue Lee. Part of his job is to help congregations struggling with declining membership. He related to us how a congregation asked him to help assess their needs and opportunities to grow. They saw their problem as not having enough members to keep paying their bills and keep the church doors open.

Pastor Lee pointed out to them the large apartment complex right across the street from the church. Had they visited those living there to invite them to church? Their response was something like, “Those people are poor; they won’t help pay the bills.” Behind that attitude can be a bit of racism: “They don’t look like us; they aren’t like us; they wouldn’t fit in our church.”

Pastor Lee admitted to us that he did not know what he could do to help that congregation. It will very likely continue to shrink in membership until forced to close. At that point, a faithful Lutheran congregation preaching God’s Word, baptizing, and teaching the faith to all nations will no longer be present in that part of the city.

What Jesus said to the man who had invited Him to dinner in his house addresses a problem many churches are struggling with. **“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”**

Why did Jesus care who the ruler of the Pharisees invited to a **dinner or banquet**? Why did Jesus comment about seating arrangements and seeking the places of honor as invited guests? Jesus is not teaching table etiquette, but about the Church as people gathered in God’s house to feast together in God’s presence. There’s nothing wrong with inviting your family and friends over to your house for a meal, but it is wrong for the church to see itself as an exclusive club with members who see themselves as better than outsiders.

Jesus had just modelled the kind of inviting He was describing by healing a man with dropsy. (Dropsy is the old term for a medical condition now known as “edema,” a build-up of fluids in the body.) The man was in poor health and there was nothing anyone could do for him – anyone but Jesus. Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees (experts in the Law of Moses) whether or not it was lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath, the Day of Rest that God had commanded through Moses that Jews should not do work. Luke notes that they were **watching Jesus closely**. This shows that they were looking for ways to accuse Him of breaking God’s law. Jesus’ enemies refused to answer His questions and remained silent, but they would later speak loudly to demand that God’s Christ be crucified.

The reason God’s Son became man was to help **the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind**, both physically and spiritually. God commanded a Sabbath rest because we need to rest, but the Sabbath should not become an excuse for us not to help people in need; doing good is always appropriate, no matter what day of the week it is.

The ruler of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dine with his family and friends in order to judge whether or not Jesus was worthy of being one of them; they were **watching Him closely** to judge if He was up to their standards of goodness. In contrast to this, Jesus humbled Himself to become the lowest of the low to exalt the lowly poor, crippled, lame, and blind. The Christian Church should be a reflection of Jesus, and when it is not, we need to repent and change our ways.

Jesus’ first parable invites us to reflect on this. God has invited the Church to dine in His presence, which is sometimes compared to a **wedding feast** in the Bible. This happens in the Divine Service of God’s Word and the Sacrament of Jesus’ body and blood. God invites us to a feast here that will continue forever in the glories of heaven.

How should we see ourselves when God honors us as His invited guests? If we see ourselves as deserving of this honor, we will choose the places of honor, drawing attention to our self-importance. If we realize that we are here only out of God’s “fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness” in us, we will humbly and gladly take the lowest place. **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

Jesus' parable warns us against exalting ourselves in His presence: **“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.”** The beginning of the Divine Service, the confession of sins, reminds us not to exalt ourselves. We “consider our unworthiness and confess before God and one another that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition.” This is humbly taking the **“lowest place”** at the Lord's Table.

But our sinful unworthiness does not prevent God from making us worthy through the merits of Christ. In the absolution we hear from the pastor as from God Himself that our sins are forgiven. We hear Jesus, the Bridegroom at the wedding feast, say to us: **“Friend, move up higher.”** This is the worthiness we need to come forward and receive the Lord's Supper. We are Jesus' honored, invited guests at the Lord's Table, not because of our worthiness, but because of His. If you ever think that you are “good enough” to receive the Lord's Supper because you have cleaned up your life and behavior, you are exalting yourself. Remember, the Supper is for sinners only, not the self-righteous.

On the other hand, if you are struggling with doubts over your worthiness, that you haven't done enough to come into God's presence now at the Supper or forever in heaven, repent of your sin of doubting God's goodness and mercy to you in Jesus. You are never going to be “good enough” in this life to get to heaven. Repent of thinking you could be or have to be good enough to be accepted by God, and believe in Jesus and His forgiveness for you.

The only One worthy of heaven is God's Son, who took **the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death upon a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him** (Phil 2:7-9a) by raising Him back to life to ascend to heaven and sit at His right hand (Heb.12:2). If you are doubting your salvation, look to Jesus on the cross; He was there instead of you, so you can be exalted by God.

This is what it means to be Christians in God's Church: God invites the humble to come and be exalted by Him; and we in faith seek out others like us who are poor, lowly, crippled, lame, and blind to invite them to come into God's Church with us.

The ruler of the Pharisees who invited Jesus to dine with him did not see himself like the man with dropsy, or as one of the other poor and needy people Jesus came to save. He saw himself as worthy before God by what he had done and only invited to his feast those he considered as worthy as himself. To him Jesus said: **“Do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”**

We don't invite to church only those who are like us and able to repay us – and this applies to both the physical and spiritual means they might or might not have, having a lot to offer us, or having nothing to offer. To condemn someone just because he or she is rich, powerful, or popular is just as wrong and sinful as looking down on someone who is poor, weak, and lowly. All are poor and lowly before God. All equally need God's grace and mercy. All people from all nations need to repent of their sins and receive God's forgiveness through the merits of Jesus Christ. These are the ones God's Church should be seeking out and inviting to the marriage feast of the Lamb on His throne.

The congregation the District mission exec visited could not look past its own needs to see the needs of those around them. That is a danger and temptation we at St. Paul, Fairmont, must confront. Are we inviting only those we think can help us, or are we looking for people who need our help in Christ? Are we inviting at all?

Jesus humbled Himself to become one of us so we could be exalted to God's right hand with Him. He invited us in to feast at His table. May God give us the eyes to see the many around us needing God's help and hearts willing to invite them to join us at His feast. Amen.