

Whose Party Is It?

August 29, 2010 Firelands Presbyterian Church

Sirach 10:12-18 Psalm 112 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14

One of the most difficult things for a parent, I think, is dealing with a child who is being rejected by his or her peers. The fifth grade boy who comes home and says, “I don’t ever want to go to school anymore.” They’re playing dodge ball in gym class and he’s always the last one chosen to be on a team—and the first one to be hit by a ball. “I’m no good,” he sobs. And we parents (and grandparents) try to tell him that dodge ball isn’t all there is in the world, and he’s good at lots of other things ... but none of that really helps.

Or the 13-year-old girl who comes home and slams doors and snarls at her parents, and it turns out that those girls she used to play Barbie with, those girls she was in Brownies with and whose soccer team she was on, they’ve now told her in no uncertain terms that she is no longer welcome to sit at their lunch table. And we parents and grandparents try to tell her that she really is a wonderful person—what a great smile she has, and can’t she play the piano brilliantly ... but it doesn’t really help.

There are hierarchies for kids in school. Many of us remember them with pain, for we were toward the bottom of those pecking orders. And maybe we sometimes remember them with guilt, because in striving to keep our own places in the sun, we know we were cruel to other kids.

As adults, the pecking orders are more subtle. Or maybe it’s just that we’ve internalized the “rules” to such an extent that we don’t even think to try to play on the team that’s likely to reject us or to sit at the table where we know we won’t be welcomed. We don’t want to be shamed. We don’t want to be humiliated.

Now, in this country we’re not entirely comfortable with this hierarchical view of society. After all, we believe that everyone is created equal, that all citizens have the chance to become president, *blah blah blah*. We have deep suspicions that this myth of equality is just that—a myth, an illusion—but we really don’t like talking about classes of people here.

And so this scripture from Luke, with its places at table and being raised up to places of honor and all that, well, it tends to strike us as not having to do with us. We scarcely ever go to banquets with name cards at our proper places anymore, unless it's at someone's wedding reception—and even a lot of those have buffets and people trying to eat standing up or balancing their plates on their knees if they can find a seat at all.

But in the culture of the time this was written, society was organized quite differently. In the first century Roman world there was not even a myth of equality. Sociologists call this an “honor society”—one of my professors talked about it in terms of a pyramid. At the top was Caesar, who had people who depended on him for their living—for positions, power, etc.—and who in turn gave him their allegiance—honor—as their patron. And each of these people then were patrons of people who depended on them and in return gave them honor . . . and those people were patrons for yet another level of society, and so on and so on, down to the lowliest of the slaves. And of course, one honored one's patron in any way possible and would never pretend to be an equal to that patron.

So at a dinner party, one's place at the table didn't depend on the whim of the host but on a very strict hierarchy in society. To sit “above” someone who was actually on a societal level superior to yours was not just a social gaffe but a shameful act—something that would need to be remedied, immediately!

So Jesus says, “Take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.” And the people there would have recognized his words because he was paraphrasing a couple of verses from Proverbs:

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among his great men;
It is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,”
than for him to humiliate you before his nobles. (25:6-7)

Proverbs is part of the Wisdom Literature in the Bible, which consists of what we might call “Rules for Living.” And if we understand them as guidelines for dealing with our fellow human

beings, these are actually sort of manipulative, aren't they? You know, "Hey, notice me sitting down here amongst the nobodies when I clearly have more value! Show everyone how important I am by moving me up!"

But Jesus is not really talking about the etiquette of dinner parties. He's talking about the etiquette of the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom, "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

In other words, in the Kingdom of God, we don't need to worry about being rejected from the table or laughed at on the playground. We don't need to worry about where we sit and who we talk with. The last shall be first and the first last. We're all mixed in together.

Jesus has some other words about the etiquette of the Kingdom of God: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." In other words, invite the "others," the ones who aren't accepted in respectable society, the ones not allowed inside the outside of the temple.

Now, what I don't think Jesus is talking about here is a banquet where the rich hosts stand off to the side and watch the poor and the crippled eat, where the hosts pat themselves on the back for being such "good Christians" that they have hosted this dinner party for those poor dears. For when we're patting ourselves on the back, we're full of pride, and didn't we hear about pride from Sirach? "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker." When we're patting ourselves on the back, we're seeing ourselves God's favorite children, the ones who've got their lives together and know how to get things done in the world, the ones who worship God properly and believe the correct doctrines ... when we're doing all that, we're getting puffed up with pride ... withdrawing our hearts from our Maker and forsaking the Lord.

No, I think when Jesus says we should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, he means not just feed them but hang out with them, get to know them. Be friends with them. Invite them to bring the potato salad when we're barbecuing. Ask them for their opinions, and tell them ours. Get to know their hearts and let them know ours.

Because then we can stop thinking of them as the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind ... or the immigrants or atheists or ex-prisoners or whoever the “others” are in our lives. Then they can just be our friends.

Because **that** is the Kingdom of God.

We cannot bring about the Kingdom of God—that kingdom that is proclaimed and yet not here, that kingdom that is both already and not yet. The fullness of God’s Kingdom happens in God’s time. But the Kingdom is not entirely in the future, off there, somewhere—we already see glimpses it. And we can live into the Kingdom. We can live as though it was already here. We don’t have to wait until we get to Heaven to invite the other, the stranger, into our lives.

Whose party is it, anyway? Not ours. Not ours.

It’s God’s party.