

Jesus' mother must have taught him well ----- when he comes to dinner in the gospel of Luke, Jesus always brings a very special "hostess gift." not a gift of wine, or flowers, but of a teaching moment. A meal is often the background for a teaching moment in the gospel of Luke. Today the meal takes place at the invitation of a prominent local religious authority **on the sabbath**. Surprise. Surprise. By now we all should know that if the reading says it's the Sabbath, Jesus is about to break a rule and we're about to learn an important lesson. Again.

All of Luke's themes are found in this passage: God's redemptive purpose, salvation for all alike, the blessings of lowliness and the dangers of status, table fellowship, the essence of discipleship.

Jesus must have had a reputation as a controversial guest. The scripture tells us that "they were watching him closely." And sure enough he lived up to his reputation. One verse into the story, as he's on his way to dinner ---- just then, the scripture says, a sick man appears before him.

You noticed I read into the gospel today verses 2-6, in which the sick man is healed by Jesus. These verses were cut from the lesson, by The people who put together our texts for each Sunday as if they had been misplaced, and interrupted the flow of the REAL story. When in fact, the interruption by someone in need itself is at the very heart of the teaching. Jesus was trying to teach that healing and humility and hospitality belong together in the kingdom of God.

For all we know this man had been hired so they could catch Jesus in the flagrant act of breaking the Sabbath by healing him. Or maybe even Jesus set the scene up by inviting the man to meet him outside the door of this house. Jesus asks THEM --- is it lawful to heal this man on the Sabbath? Or not? Silence. Jesus says, well, if someone fell down a well on the Sabbath, you wouldn't bother whether it was lawful or not? Or would you? Once again. Silence. They couldn't think of how to respond to that.

Jesus heals the man, flaunting God's awesome healing power before their very eyes. The healed man leaves. Dinner continues.

Jesus hosts were watching Jesus closely. Jesus was watching them as well. He watched as the other guests scrambled for the places of honor around the table. And he was moved to speak to them about humility and honor and hospitality. They're not separate stories, but part of the same story of God's grace.

In Jesus day, status was determined by both money and honor. And there seemed to be a limited amount of each. Knowing one's place, maintaining one's place ---- at the expense of others --- was an important part of preserving order in society. Jesus didn't make up his advice on his own. Jesus draws on the wisdom of Proverbs to teach about the etiquette of seating and invitation: practical ways to avoid embarrassment and receive and dispense honor. Jesus ' lessons also teach that discipleship is both about how to be a good guest – a recipient of God's grace --- and how to be a good host ---- a channel for God's grace to others.

God's free gift of grace challenges human economic understanding. For at the heavenly banquet, a metaphor for the kingdom of God, there are no limits to God's guest list. And the feast of God's grace laid before the guests is never ending. Receiving this gift of grace is so very difficult for us to grasp, because we are used to paying for what we want most, and planning on ways to get it. We are used to weighing our obligations and saying and doing what might be politically correct for us. That is the way our world works.

The economy of God's grace is different however. For we can never earn or repay God's goodness to us. And therein lies true hospitality. God's hospitality. Authentic hospitality is modeled on God's hospitality to us. Authentic hospitality entails offering our best with no strings attached, especially when there is no chance of reciprocity.

Authentic hospitality is a new and different way of being in relationship with those around us. It is receiving the abundance of God's grace with humility and then becoming instruments of that grace by inviting people in ---- rather than being gatekeepers and keeping the wrong people out. How ironic that those to whom Jesus is speaking in this parable are concerned about having their place ---- they don't realize that all are invited! How ironic that we can actually twist Jesus' words into ways that humility might actually be a manipulative strategy to gain honor.

Learning to be a good guest and a good host is learning about a new way of being in relationship with ourselves as well. True humility is not about lowliness, but about seeing ourselves the way God sees us. Because of Jesus saving grace, God sees each of us as forgiven, loved and free. When we trust that God's goodness is available without condition for us, we have to realize that God's goodness is available without condition for all. And we can let go of the need to plan, purchase, reciprocate, manipulate for our seat at the Table.

Your place is at the Table.

My place is at the Table.

All God's children have a place at the Table.

Sometimes we block access to the table unintentionally, often we take up more than our share of room. Some of us spend an inordinate amount of time figuring out who should be at the table rather than how to make sure all the guests are here. That is part of being human.

We are mistaken if we think there are only so many places at the table or that we can control the outcome of authentic hospitality. There are risks to this new way of relating to the world. Jesus' example in his ministry challenges us to be most hospitable to those who are least, lost, little or dead.¹ Not everyone wants to be where everyone is welcome, none of us wants to be there all the time. But there are delightful surprises in store for us when we sign up for God's form of hospitality.

The letter of Hebrews challenges us to live hospitably with those we know well, and with those we don't. We never know who our lives will touch --- angels perhaps. And God, most certainly.

Jesus shows us that authentic hospitality not only involves inviting the stranger to the Table, but interrupting our plans for dinner when someone is in need. The way he stopped on his way to dinner when a man needed healing. Making sure we ourselves are fed, or that dinner begins on time, is not our most important task. Jesus always put people before plans, and demonstrated that in showing mercy we honor others and please God most, and when we honor the least, the lost, the little and the dead, we honor God himself, the host of our heavenly banquet.

*May God grant us grace to cultivate true humility,
and practice true hospitality. Amen.*

¹ Capon, Robert Farrar. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985.