

Rev. Ellen Dawson | September 1, 2019
Luke 14:1, 7-14 | "You've Been Invited"
FOX CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

New Testament Reading -- Luke 14:1, 7-14

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Buzzfeed has listed some common awkward social situations, and they've even given each situation an awkward score:

- The person wearing the same clothes as you at a party — 45% awkward
- The person who traps you for a chat that you don't want to have — 66% awkward
- Attempting a handshake, hug, or kiss, and having the other person choose something different — 86% awkward
- Saying goodbye and then leaving in the same direction — 53% awkward
- Having to introduce someone when you can't remember their name — 97% awkward

Are any of these awkward situations something you have experienced? If so, then you know that in the moment, you just do whatever you can to get rid of the awkwardness -- by smiling, walking away, or even just naming it and saying "well, this is awkward."

And these moments *always* happen in social situations like parties, fundraisers, weddings, or corporate events. We naturally try to avoid these things, but ultimately, they are bound to happen.

In today's passage, we step into the home of a Pharisee. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus has accepted an invitation to go share a meal there. Canadian Pastor, Daryl Dash explains, "...what we have in front of us is Jesus in the middle of a very awkward situation of his own making. You could legitimately call this story 'Jesus the awkward dinner guest' — but the awkwardness is for a purpose."

You see, Jesus had been invited there by the Pharisees specifically for them to continue challenging him. They were waiting for Jesus to break the rules. They were waiting for a chance to catch him doing something against the law. The Pharisees were putting Jesus in a situation where he was bound to say or to do something that was, according to them, *wrong*.

But they didn't expect what happened next. In the beginning of this chapter right before today's passage, we read that almost as soon as Jesus arrived, he sees a man with a painful, uncomfortable condition. He heals this man, knowing full well that this action would be breaking the law according to the Pharisees, because it was the Sabbath.

At that point, Jesus looked around and "noticed how the guests chose the places of honor." In that day, at a big meal such as this, there were couches or elevated benches, usually set in a U shape, with the guests reclining. The host would be at the base of the U with the most honored guests on his left and right. The guests would have washed their hands first, then moved to a seat. Jesus was watching as a few people made their way to the best seats.

Now, for us, in this day and age, we don't have the same dynamics...or do we? Most wedding receptions that I've been to have assigned seating, because if they didn't, people would choose the table closest to the bridal party, or closest to the buffet line. In the high school cafeteria -- who doesn't want to sit at the cool table? We all knew where that table was, don't deny it! At social events like this, we all want to sit next to the speaker, or the birthday boy, or the person who invited us because it's the place where we are guaranteed to have a good time. There will be good conversation. We will be served first. Awkwardness will be at a minimum, guaranteed.

The societal dynamics of a Sabbath meal in Jesus' day were especially interesting. The IVP New Testament Commentary explains that the people seated next to that host were not just seen as the cool kids, they were seen as having prestige and power. The seating choice was a status symbol. So the guests *were* choosing places of honor -- elbowing their way to the best seats in the house.

In the parable, Jesus talks about a wedding banquet to make a point. In Jewish culture, weddings were a week-long community party. Sitting by the host was something everyone in the town would observe. So it's the perfect example for the point he wants to make. He says, in this parable, 'don't assume you're the most important person there.' Otherwise, you may find yourself and your host in...that's right...a pretty awkward situation.

This isn't a round table where you can just pull up a seat or scootch over. Nope - he points out to the guests that day -- if you sit in one of the best seats, and someone with more social status than you comes along, the host is going to ask you to move. And that is something that will be disruptive and, quite honestly, embarrassing. You'll move to the open place at the table - the lowest seat, far away from the host. It would be embarrassing, right? To have to get up and move to the table in the back, or the kids table in the other room. But for them, it was a move down the social ladder. The Greek words chosen here point out the shame connected with a situation like this. Every step away from the host is hurtful to your reputation, and to your pride.

Why was this so important to Jesus? Because, according to New Testament Professor Darryl Bock, "Status brings power, and power often begets pride. Jesus regards this equation as destructive to spiritual health. Jesus' disciples are marked by humility. Both how we operate socially and whom we invite to dinner indicate the type of person we are. Humility means ignoring rank or class." I would argue humility even means ignoring your own comfort in a social situation. A humble attitude is a fundamental aspect of being a disciple.

Well the party doesn't end there. Jesus moves from calling out the guests to challenging the Pharisee who invited him. By now, everyone had been deliberately insulted by Jesus at this party. This was about 96% awkward. Jesus says to the host, don't invite friends,

brothers, relatives and rich neighbors....invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Darryl Bock writes, "In ancient culture, the one who hosted a festive meal would be placed on the invitation list for future meals at the guests' homes. Jesus argues that such 'payback' hospitality has no merit. The best hospitality is given, not merely exchanged in a kind of unspoken social contract."

What Jesus was saying was that the host was motivated by what he was getting, not what he was giving. And as followers of Jesus, that's not how we are to approach, well, anything.

In our everyday lives, we come across many many scenarios where we can be motivated by our own desires, and greed, and I would even argue, our comfort. We do anything we can to be and to stay comfortable. To avoid embarrassment and awkwardness.

But what could be more awkward than walking up to someone you don't know and saying come to my party. Just pause and think about it for a second. You're planning a dinner party in your home. You will do extra cleaning that week. You'll plan the menu. You'll use the dishes you only use for special occasions. And for whom? For what?

If we really listen to what Jesus is saying here, this is what the party would look like: you'd have strangers in one room. Nobody would show up with a bottle of wine as a gift. Some would probably have body odor. A few would cause a little anxiety because you would have no idea what bad joke they were going to tell next. You, as the host, would just be hoping that these socially-awkward, totally random gathering of people from the community would be able to hold conversations and perhaps find some things in common.

This parable teaches us that "If God reaches out to all, then those who seek to honor him should reach out also." Our guest list indicates our focus on God's kingdom, not on our comforts, and so do our actions in these scenarios.

Jesus, the rabbi that he was, shared this parable as a way to teach about humility, generosity, and inclusive hospitality. Honor is not to be seized, it is to be given. God honors the humble, because humble people "recognize their desperate need for God, not any right to blessing." God's children focus on what they can give, not what they will get. Followers of Jesus don't create situations where they know they will be comfortable, in fact, followers of Jesus are to be uncomfortable.

We have to realize...Jesus isn't a kid that hasn't been taught the proper etiquette. He isn't socially insensitive. He's just upending the way we normally think and act. He's making us stop and consider our motivations. He's teaching because that's what he was called and anointed to do.

“We’re meant to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is radically different than the way that we operate, so much so that we tend to see it as a little inappropriate, a little bit socially awkward,” writes Charlie Boyd. “The way that God operates is so contrary to the way that we think that we tend to see it as weird, even a little bit embarrassing. We don’t know how to react. It was true in Jesus’ day, and it’s true for us today.”

The Kingdom of God doesn’t follow rules or etiquette. Isn’t that good to know?

And we are reminded of this every time we share in the Lord’s Supper. I actually think that’s why Jesus taught us to remember him in this setting - as a meal. Because it means we have been invited to his table. And we will never be able to repay our Lord. He doesn’t invite us because he’ll receive something. He doesn’t invite us because we are the best and brightest. The best conversationalists. The most stylish. The ones that bring that tasty appetizer.

Jesus He invites us out of love, and grace, and acceptance.

We, the mistake-makers and lawbreakers, are invited.

We, who are driven by egos and lured by prosperity, are invited

We, the weary, the hungry, the broken, the proud, the spiritually-crippled, the desperate, the grieving. We are invited.

When the Pharisee invited Jesus, to the party that day, he didn’t know what he was in for.

And the more you know your Lord, the more you let Jesus lead and guide you, the more you take the time to seek God, the more you will feel that way too - you just don’t know what God wants to do and can do in your life. Being a disciple is saying you are okay with taking risks, with stepping out in faith, with being uncomfortable, even awkward.

So now, let’s all come to the table, as we are, no matter what, with all of the things that make us totally unworthy. For we are invited in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.