

September 1, 2019
The Rev. Mark Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

The Fiesta Invite List

I have attended a fair number of wedding receptions over the years. These are joyful occasions that bring together family and friends from far and wide to celebrate the blessing of a marriage. The locations of the weddings themselves have mostly been around church altars, but have included a few beaches along the way, an orchard, a backyard, a living room, a vineyard, and hotel ballrooms.

As a matter of custom and courtesy, Leslie and I are often invited to the reception that follows the ceremony. Early on in our marriage when our kids were young and when things were pretty lean financially, we viewed a wedding reception invite as a night out. Chicken or beef – we replied: absolutely! A baby sitter was secured and off we went.

Like anyone who has ever attended sit-down wedding receptions, we would look for our names and table number on place cards near the door. Going through my head was always: where will they put the clergyman and his wife this time? Often, we are seated with family members – I've sat next to many grandparents over the years. Sometimes I get the feeling that the clergy are strategically seated at the table of relatives or friends the couple hopes will be on better behavior if we are seated next to them. That strategy rarely works.

Whether we are talking about wedding receptions, State dinners, corporate functions, Thanksgiving Day dinner, who is invited – or not invited -- and where they sit can make a world of difference.

What does Luke's parable of the wedding banquet tell us about God and our relationship with others? Let me pose the question another way: Is Jesus more interested in the seating chart – who sits where? -- the guest list, or the party itself?

First, the seating chart – who sits where?

The gospel story is set the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath where everyone is watching Jesus closely. What is also clear is that Jesus was also watching them. What he noticed first was how the guests chose places of honor. It would be as if these guests took their tent-shaped place cards, tossed the cards on the floor, and marched right up the head table – not even looking if they had been assigned to seat at the kids' table in the corner or with the distant relatives from Ohio near the back.

A simple lesson the parable is making is this: don't make assumptions for how important you think you are. Hold back and wait. It is better to be humble – take a seat at the edges -- than be humbled by being asked to move to make room for someone else. Then comes the expected gospel reversal of fortunes: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Lessons about humility should never get old. The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. And yes, it

can be feel like we can never measure up to the way Jesus lived. But if we believe what we say believe, that the Holy Spirit moves within, even in small ways each day we can move towards more kindness, forgiveness and love in our lives and in our world and away from what is contrary to the Gospel: cruelty, vengeance and hatred.

It's not always easy to lead with humility in a culture of sharp elbows and high expectations -- in a society built around the rights and self-determination of the individual. Hearing again this simple message can help us re-set any false or failed notions that our personal needs and wants always take precedence over the needs of others and the larger community.

We see how elements of this parable can lead to a long overdue conversation about who gets the preferred and privileged places at the table of life. Where we sit, where we live, the work we do and the ways we are treated when we walk into a room reveal a lot. If you are used to going to the front of the line, well, this conversation can be both uncomfortable and unsettling.

I attended a conference this year where a very dynamic church leader from Duke University, who studied to the Academy here in Exeter, was talking to a packed ballroom of Episcopal Church leaders about what they might do to bring about needed change in our society. To the many white men in ties and clerical collars in attendance that morning, she invited us to consider stepping aside and allowing others to a chance to speak and lead. Step aside? Lose our place? Polite and tentative applause followed.

What do you hear in this parable? Is Jesus suggesting to the normally exalted and rarely humbled -- wait a minute! When God is in fully in charge of the seating chart, be prepared for surprises. Never assume that a place of privilege, access and honor is a permanent seat. As with many things in life: it is not ours to take, it is God's to give.

God is playing a game of musical chairs to make a point. If we are all created in God's image, our place at the wedding banquet of life and beyond is not based on the power we think we wield or the advantages that may have been given to us at our birth. The apostle Paul cleared that up long ago when he wrote in Galatians: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

And if we are one, we should be prepared to allow others to be lifted up, allowed in and brought forward. And at times, step to the side to make room.

As Jesus tosses out the pre-assigned seating chart, the Lord is also changing up the invite list.

I am drawn to Eugene Peterson's The Message translation of these verses: "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks."

What this new invite list can show us is that the highest value in relationships should never be based on what is exchanged or received in return. It is a rejection of "You watch my back, I'll watch yours,"—or "I'll put in a good word for you if you do the same for me," which has little lasting value in God's Kingdom.

This transactional view of the world and relationships can slowly seep into our faith and spiritual life.

Such as, if someone were to say: I will believe in God when God keeps up God's side of the relationship. If I ask, knock, and search, I want to know that doors will be opened and prayers will be answered.

Of course, some have little need for faith or God when life is unfolding just fine. Everyone is healthy. Kids are settled and successful. Jobs are secure and rewarding. Marriages steady. There is money in the bank and a nest egg for tomorrow. God must be blessing all of the good coming our way for life is good. My corner of the world at least is at peace -- no famines, crises, wars or natural disasters.

And, then, what happens...if and when it's not. Very few of us get through life without times in the wilderness. When we are most afraid. When the ground beneath us is unsteady. When parts of our lives unravel, trust is broken, when we lose any sense that we were ever in control to begin with. What then? Who then?

In the lessons we hear Sunday after Sunday we come to know a God who is with us in good times and bad times. God was as present in the paradise of the Garden of Eden as God was after Noah's flood, the Exodus from Egypt, in the long desert wilderness, through the Exile in Babylonia, in the restored Jerusalem, at the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, in the Garden of Gethsemane where the disciples fell asleep, during the trial of and at the cross, and at the Empty Tomb when the Resurrection was proclaimed. God is with us today.

The only condition God makes is for us to believe that what God gives is given freely. It is what we call grace. We don't have to earn it, appreciate it or understand it fully. We can wander off, mess us, and even doubt.

Wedding banquets in the gospels are expressions and rehearsals for what is to come when God sets the table. When God's kingdom will be fully in place and known for all of creation.

We respond as the communion bread is broken: "Let us keep the feast, Alleluia." This is when I always prefer the Spanish translation for that response and the 'feast.' Fiesta. *Celebremos la fiesta!*

God promises a *fiesta*. Come closer. Accept the invitation.