

Proper 17 C
Collect BCP p. 233
2010
Jeremiah 2:4-13

Luke 14:1, 7-14

If we're not careful this gospel begins to sound like a lesson in social manipulation. Who knows, maybe that strata of understanding isn't completely absent. But there is movement under the surface.

For most of us, the place we're assigned at dinner isn't too important, provided we're not seated next the prize boor of the party. But in the ancient world, these things were important. They reflected your status in the community and, therefore, were public signals of the kind of business deals you could make, the sort of education you could get for your children, who you could rely on in emergencies. Even more, if you didn't defend your status by sitting as high as your status allowed you to sit - and maybe a bit more - your status in the community would slip. There would be both economic and social repercussions. So there was a lot of jockeying. If you read the ancient rules about how to determine proper seating, they're extensive documents.

Sixty or seventy years ago, as most of you know, masses of ancient Jewish documents were discovered in caves above the Dead Sea. They threw a lot of light on the New Testament, and this is one of the passages on which they threw it. One scroll discusses God's final victory over his enemies and, after the victory, the celebratory feast. The list of those not invited to this feast is the same list we find in this Lucan parable. In the Dead Sea Scrolls these are the ones not invited to the feast of God's victory, but in Luke they are the ones we are instructed to invite. We have happened upon an ancient denominational spat between the Jewish community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls and the folks in the Jesus movement.

Banquet seating, then, was more than Emily Post. It's how God's intention for his community was understood. Luke's Jesus says: Those who are physically, morally, socially imperfect are to be included. Those who are without status are to be included. Those who are always pawns of others are to be included. Why? Luke doesn't tell us, at least directly. So I'm offering a speculation, a theory. I don't know this. I can't prove it. I just suspect it. In the Old Testament we find God given the title "savior". The Hebrew word translated by "savior" is "*go'el*" and it has a glottal stop between the two syllables that I can't produce. So this is not the way to pronounce it, don't be deceived, my articulation is awful.

The *go'el* was the person responsible for ransoming you if you were captured by the Amalekites and enslaved. In the extended families of the Near East there needed to be some specific person assigned the responsibility of taking care of your needs if you got into trouble. That's what it means to say God is savior, that God is fulfilling the role of *go'el* for his family. The *go'el* was not a general, all purpose savior, but had a specific role: ransoming you if taken captive, representing you in legal cases, in other words serving as your attorney since they didn't

have professional lawyers. The *go'el* protected you from abuse by people outside the family.

The Old Testament says repeatedly that God is the *go'el* of the poor, the stranger, the outcast, those who have no one else to perform that function for them. In other words, these people are, in a concrete way, God's particular family. These are the people for whom God is *go'el*.

Notice that in Luke's story, if you invite these people to your banquet, you will be repaid. This implies an existing debt. Otherwise you wouldn't be repaid. Where does this debt come from? The debt is owed by God to you because you have been fulfilling his responsibilities as *go'el*. Now there is an unemphasized but still present implication that God has, perhaps, been a bit slow off the mark in taking care of some of these things. You're just giving God a little boost by having his family to dinner, recognizing their humanity.

Congregational Comment: Were some of these people considered ritually unclean? I'm sure that wasn't God's plan.

No, but it's easy to think it is. I'm not sure there's that much difference between saying, "Well, we're going to exclude you from the banquet because you're ritually unclean" and what the Episcopal Church was doing when I was growing up, excluding children from the Eucharist, from God's banquet, because "They can't understand it." We find different kinds of reasons for drawing lines and we make God responsible for each line we draw. The Dead Sea Scroll folk thought they were doing God's will in excluding the imperfect. My priestly predecessors thought they were protecting the honor of God by excluding children. It's ironic. That which was intended as an instrument and sign of unity become one of division. This brings us face to face with the lesson from Jeremiah.

OK. This is what I think is going on in this parable. If you invite these folks to your feast, you will be repaid because you are assisting God in the fulfillment of his family responsibilities.

What's that got to do with us? First, if the church's job is to assist God in the fulfillment of his responsibilities then it doesn't make too much difference where you are sitting in the assembly, so long as the assembly is focused, not on these internal matters of position at the table, or their analogues, but on supporting God in accomplishing the tasks of the *go'el*, of speaking on behalf of the poor, the vulnerable, the disadvantage and all who lack someone to speak for them.

Now the church is successful at reflecting all sorts of very human things – I've actually seen people at church functions get upset about where they were seated. "So and so took my pew. I've sat there for thirty years." It also shows up as "Well I've been doing all the grunt work and have sat on the grungy committees for years and haven't yet been asked to be on the vestry." Locally that would never happen. But there are other places where the example would be valid.

These same things return to haunt us. Luke says, put the life of the Christian community on another foundation. Put it on the foundation of helping God with God's work. And then you will be repaid.

That's about all that needs to be said about that. I'll close with a phrase from today's collect that relates to all this. In this collect we ask God to do a series of things for us. We say, "increase in us true religion, nourish us in all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works." Right? As a matter of fact, we don't say that. I've misquoted the collect, in a way I've frequently heard it misquoted. What we do say is, "nourish us *with* all goodness." In other words, the goodness we're asking for isn't that which arises in ourselves, but is that which arises in the rest of the community. We are to be open hearted enough to receive it and take part in it. This collect is a prayer to God that we may receive what the community has to give us. God preserve me from church members who sacrifice themselves for the sake of the church and are aware of it. What's missing in them is precisely this willingness to receive, this awareness of the importance of receiving from each other. Here, in this community, we are to be nourished by each other's goodness. The openness to that, the awareness of that, the seeking of that, is one of the marks of the genuine Christian community. Who cares about being good to get into heaven? Only the essentially self-centered. If you are going to care about being good, care about it because it gives you something to share with the other members of the church. It gives you something to share with this world, in its present troubles, needs and sufferings. Back we are, you see, at that banquet, inviting people in, not because of honor, power or place, but because we have something to share with them, and as the family of God, they have something to share with us.

OK. That's enough about that. Please stand for the creed.