“Invite the Poor”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Jesus’ parable about sitting in the back during a wedding reception doesn’t apply to most modern day weddings. When we walk in the door, we look for our names on a table or on a poster board listed in alphabetical order with our table number beside our name. As the pastor, we’re usually sitting at a front table, at a place of honor with family.

Unless they don’t like me, then we’re seated in the back with cousins just out of jail who need an authority figure to keep them out of trouble during the reception.

Even though we don’t get to pick where we sit, we get Jesus’ point of “those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted”.

In verse 1, we learn that Jesus is “dining at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, for they were watching him”.

Because his host is a ruler and a Pharisee, we can safely assume that Jesus is enjoying a sumptuous meal. Because of his host’s wealth, this ruler would have been one of the ones seated in the front in a place of honor at the marriage feast. Jesus suggests he sit in the back next time and learn some humility.

Then Jesus tells him that when he hosts a dinner like the one Jesus is enjoying, “don’t invite your friends or your brothers or you kinsmen or your rich neighbors” who are exactly the people who have gathered around the table to listen to this popular itinerant preacher. “You invite them so they will invite you in return and you will be repaid.”
But when you give a feast, not just at the Redeemer Crisis Center once a month or in our fellowship hall every 4 months, “But also in your own home, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, the homeless, the working poor, the retired, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

On this Labor Day weekend, Jesus challenges us to share our food while interacting with people who are struggling economically.

This imperative to share goes all the way back to Genesis. One great example is when the Hebrew people have escaped slavery in Egypt and are given “manna” in the wilderness.

In Exodus 16:18 we read that “each one had as much as he needed”.

Equal access to the resources became the cornerstone for an economics of equality which set them apart from their neighbors in a radical way. The Old Testament covenant was clear that not only the love of God was imperative but also the love of neighbor, especially the neighbor in need. Over and over again scripture emphasized the importance of distribution of necessities of life in such a way that there “be no hungry among you”.

In the early Old Testament years of Israel’s history, the poor and disadvantaged, widows, orphans, and impaired were given special rights. They could eat grapes while walking through a vineyard or pluck grain from a field while passing by. Owners were encouraged not to harvest too efficiently so that gleaners might have some.

Garments or other items necessary for survival, if taken as loan security, had to be returned each night so that the person would not have to face the night without a means of survival.
Exodus 22:25-27 . . . 25 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. 26 If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; 27 for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

Every seven years all debts were to be forgiven.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2 . . . 1 Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed.

There were many more imperatives concerning the treatment of the poor. This may have been more ideal than real just as our food pantry ministry, Redeemer Crisis Center ministry, community meals, help for struggling Parma Park families, and taking supplies to the Lakeside Homeless Shelter, are our ideal and what we so faithfully support while struggling to make those ideals real in our everyday lives together. Jesus challenging us to invite the poor to our dinner table at home is a bit much, we think. Although Danette and I believe we accomplished that ideal for 15 years as foster parents. It was often challenging, especially at the dinner table.

In this parable and others, Jesus is taking seriously the Jewish concept of equity. Even if the dominant powers that Jesus is eating with ignore this equity concept, the people of God can bring their influence to bear on the powers. The prophets tell us that the day of Lord is when
justice shall roll down like a river, righteousness shall be established in its fullness, swords shall be beaten into plowshares, and the wolf shall dwell with the lamb.

The Christian church in its early years also got into the spirit of equity. Paul wrote in 11 Corinthians 8:13-14 . . .

13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

People of faith need desperately to get back to the teachings of the 10 Commandments, Jesus, and Paul. But equality is a difficult concept for us to accept.

On this Labor Day weekend we celebrate free enterprise, low unemployment, competition, and individualism. Most of us would agree that equality is impossible to achieve.

I want to be clear that the equality scripture is describing when applying it to our society is not a give-away program or another form of blind welfare. The Law of Moses instructed the people to “restore” the poor and the hungry. It is a matter of creating an environment of responsibility and not dependency which has been for too long a tendency in the United States.

We discern the genuinely dependent such as sick, elderly, children, and impaired from the able-bodied and able-minded.

I invoke St. Paul's injunction in 11 Thessalonians 3:10 . . . “If any person is not willing to work, let them not eat”. This is just as important a cultural imperative as “there shall be no poor among you”.

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Some of our politicians and bureaucrats, often out of touch with what poverty is, are keen on the idea of eliminating it by cutting the poor off, cutting them down, and thereby eliminating the problem without doing the work of discerning who is in genuine human need and who is not.

Jesus and Moses, on the other hand, solve the problem by holding the better off people responsible to leave food for the gleaners which might be a parallel to our modern day food pantries.

Finally, I want to talk about a verse from an 18\textsuperscript{th} century hymn written by Charles Wesley

\begin{quote}
Love divine, all loves excelling,

Joy of heaven to earth come down!

Fix in us thy humble dwelling!

All thy faithful mercies crown,

JESUS THOU ART ALL COMPASSION,

Pure, unbounded love thou art;

Visit us with thy salvation,

Enter every trembling heart.
\end{quote}

“Jesus thou art all compassion”. God is compassion. Jesus is compassion. We are to be compassion. Our culture is to be compassion.

Today we give thanks for our jobs. We give thanks for our food and shelter. We give thanks for all of our Divinity ministries and all of us who work so hard to serve others.

We are a “people and place of hope, healing, and welcome”. We welcome the poor. We welcome the hungry. We welcome the unemployed. We welcome people of all sexual
orientations. If “welcome” is going to be part of our mission statement then we need to welcome
everyone. We are compassion for everyone.

“Jesus thou art all compassion”. Divinity thou art all compassion.

May the peace of God . . . WOV #718 -- Here in This Place