

God's Guest List
Luke 14:15-24
Rev. Dan Schumacher

A little over a week ago, and I was out fly fishing on a section of river that I knew was too close to Denver. I knew there was a good chance it would be crowded. Well, it did not disappoint. When I pulled in, every single parking space was already filled.

By nothing short of a miracle, I found a vacant and undisturbed stretch of water. But that didn't last long. Within minutes, the bank of the river on either side of me looked like the photos of Florida when it decided to reopen its beaches.

Before I knew it, I had fishermen crowding me on either side. Then, one guy waded across the river, stood directly across from me, and decided to fish the water I was fishing, even casting his line over the top of my line. And I knew, deep in my gut, the way you know such things, that this jerk was from Denver.

Now, I'm not sure you know this, but I'm from Wyoming. Wyoming is the least populated state in the union. There are three times more pronghorn in Wyoming than people. In Wyoming, "social distancing" isn't a new thing. "Social distancing" is just called Monday. It's just part of who we are and what we do. We don't like to be crowded; that's why we live in Wyoming. And, in Wyoming, if you want to get into a knock-down, drag-out, winner-take-all brawl, you stand directly across river from someone who's already there fishing and cast you your line over their line.

To be fair, this guy didn't know me from Adam; didn't know I was raised in Wyoming. But he stepped directly across river from me and started casting over my line, fishing my water. And I was fuming.

Well, I was fuming internally, any way. All I could think about was how I wanted to cause this guy physical harm, but I didn't because I'm a "pastor..." and I just couldn't call our Moderator to come post my bail.

So, I did the next best thing. I let out a loud passive-aggressive sigh and give him a half-hearted wave, while avoiding eye contact.

He shouted across the river, "What fly are you using?" It's code language in the fly fishing world for, "Have you caught anything?"

I shouted back, "The hot fly is a pheasant tail." I'm not sure you caught it, but that's code language, too. It means: "None of your business."

I was still fuming when all of a sudden my line went tight. I set the hook and, through the water, I see the bright flash of the underbelly of a BIG trout. Now, I couldn't help it, but a slightly sinister, wry smile stretched across my face as I thought about how I was going to catch this giant trout right under that guy's nose.

The trout was thick and strong, and before I knew it, I'd waded out into the middle of the river to try and land this fish in the current. I glanced up. The guy opposite me had stopped fishing and was watching the whole thing. "Perfect," I thought. "Could there be better vindication than *this*!?"

And, about that moment, the fish shifted downstream from me, and I knew I was in trouble. I lifted my rod to try to pull the trout to the surface, and just as I jabbed my net below it, that giant trout flicked its head to the side, broke off my fly, and disappeared into deeper waters.

I was still shaking my head in disbelief, when I looked up at the guy across the river, and what does he say? What does *every* fisherman say when the fishing doesn't go his way?

With a chuckle, he says, "It's still better than being at work, right?" Suddenly, I wanted to hurt him again.

He was referring to the old cliché that goes: "A bad day fishing is better than a good day at work." You literally cannot go fishing with anyone, anywhere without hearing someone say that at some point during the day: "A bad day fishing is better than a good day at work." It's what we in the "fraternity of fly fishers" say to each other to acknowledge our shared sense of community.

We don't pay dues. We don't swear allegiances. We don't have a secret handshake or pledge oaths or recite creeds. There is no fly fisher phone tree or secret tattoo. The way we know that you are one of us is if at some point during the day you say, "It's still better than being at work, right?"

That's sort of how this parable starts. It starts with a toast at a dinner party that defines who is in the "in crowd" and who is an "outsider;" who's "in" and who's "out." Cheers to the insiders.

It was a Pharisee who was throwing that dinner party, and he invited all of his seminary friends and their spouses to attend. He even extended a special invitation to that itinerant rabbi, Jesus. He'd heard he was in town and thought he might add an interesting, if perhaps laughable perspective to the conversation.

The evening was just getting under way. The host was still collecting coats at the door and making introductions, when Jesus arrived. But you would never believe who he brought as his "plus one" — a man afflicted with dropsy. When someone had dropsy, they retained fluid, often causing the limbs to swell unnaturally. It could be painful, and made the person look disfigured.

The man's legs, ankles, and feet were swollen and hideous. His skin was stretched so tight it looked like it might burst at any moment. He walked with a gait because of the condition; couldn't even get sandals on his feet.

Everyone noticed. All eyes were on him. Jesus looked at them and said, “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath or not?” And when they didn’t know what to say — I mean, what would you say in that situation? — Jesus shook his head with disappointment.

They were all still standing there in awkward silence, when the host tried to recover, tried to shift gears. “Why don’t we make our way to the table?” he said, eyes wide and hoping Jesus wasn’t going to be this awkward all evening.

The head of the table was always reserved for the most honored and revered person. The others couldn’t help themselves. They began jockeying for that seat. And as they did, Jesus said, “Isn’t there more honor in starting low and being invited up to a seat of honor, than the disgrace of clamoring for a seat that isn’t yours?” The other guests froze. You could cut the tension with a knife.

“Uhhh... good news everyone. Dinner is served!” said the host, now thinking he might push the evening along as quickly as possible.

It was a feast. Soups and breads and sauces for dipping. Fresh fruits and vegetables. Meats and platters and deserts by the tray. Good tea and strong wine. Even long after they were gorged, it just kept coming and coming, course after course. All the guests were amazed and complimented their host’s hospitality. They said, “Oh, we owe you one after all of this! What a meal! What night!”

But, as the host poured the after dinner drinks, Jesus, the party pooper, chimed in yet again: “Can I make one suggestion? Instead of inviting your friends or family, consider inviting those who could really *use* a feast, and not just those who can repay you with a return invitation? Then this meal could be a sign of God’s kingdom.”

And *that* is when one of the guests grabbed his glass and stood. He raised his glass high and said: “Blessed is anyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15).

You don’t have to work too hard to get what what he was really saying. What he was really saying was, “Blessed are *WE* who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

His wasn’t so much an open invitation for others to join them, as it was a toast to himself and those already around the table. Surely God knew how holy they were — seminary trained and all. Surely God would welcome them, of all people, into the kingdom.

Now, do you think those at the table were really that holy? Or had they maybe just convinced themselves they were that holy? How can we tell?

The Franciscan Catholic Priest, Richard Rohr, suggests as a rule of thumb that those who believe they are holy aren’t (*Simplicity*, 78). The irony, of course, in believing you’ve achieved holiness is that it means you’ve completely missed the mark.

St. Augustine has arguably had a more profound effect than any other theologian in history on our understanding of the Christian faith, and do you know what he said about his own condition? He said, "My soul is like a house; small for you to enter [O, God,] but I pray you to enlarge it."

That is the prayer of one who understood that on the spiritual journey there is no moment when you have finally arrived.

So, when one of them, full of his own self-righteousness, stood up and gave a toast to himself, Jesus couldn't take it.

"There was once a man who threw a great banquet, much like this one," he said. "And when all was prepared and it was time for the dinner, he sent out his servant to gather the guests. But rather than come, they began to make excuses.

'Oh, the timing is terrible,' said one. 'I just bought some land and need to go check it out. Sorry, but I won't be able to make it.'

Another said, 'I just pulled back into town. I was off buying a herd of oxen, and it needs my attention still. Sorry, but I won't be able to make it.'

And another, 'I just got married, and we're still in that newlywed phase, if you know what I mean (wink, wink). We're really looking forward to a night in tonight. Sorry, but I won't be able to make it.'

The servant returned with no guests, and the owner of house grew angry. But instead of stewing in his own anger and not enjoying his feast, he said to his servant, 'You know what — Go out to the streets and roads and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

When that was done, there was still room in the banquet hall, so he said to his servant again, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and round up anyone you find, so that my house may be full'" (Luke 14:16-23, paraphrase).

Can you imagine how those guests heard that story?

Jesus might as well have said, "Three times tonight, I have tried to invite you to take a step closer to entering the kingdom of God, and three times you have offered up excuses that don't hold water. You have chosen the *status quo* over the kingdom of God.

Do you know what my Father would do? He would say, 'Son, go out and invite in those who have had to live with struggle their whole lives — the crippled, the blind, the poor. Go out and invite in the forgotten, son. Go out to the highways and the hedges and invite in the marginalized — so that my banquet will be filled with those who know they stand in need of my grace.'"

And so, having thoroughly ruined their dinner party, that's exactly what Jesus did.

Judgment never feels good. It's always painful, always difficult to receive, always difficult to accept as true about us — so thank God we aren't Pharisees, right? Thank God, we're the church, and we don't keep anybody out, do we?

Or do we?

Fred Craddock tells the story of his first student church out in eastern Tennessee. He says:

"I worked there in the summers as a seminarian and it was about twenty miles from Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge had gotten into place. The atomic energy thing was booming and folk were coming and constructing that little town into a city. Folk were coming from everywhere. Hard-hat types, in tents and trailers and little temporary huts and all kind of lean-tos. They covered those beautiful hills with temporary quarters, wash hanging out on the fences and little kids crying through the muddy places where all these things were parked.

My little church, an aristocratic little church, white frame building, beautiful little church was near by. It was a nice church, wonderful people. I called the board together and said, 'We need to reach out to those folk who are here. They just come in from everywhere and they're fairly close. Here's our mission.'

The chairman of the board said, 'Oh, I don't think so.' I said, 'Why?'

He said, 'They won't fit in. After all, they're just here temporarily, living in those trailers and all.'

'Well, they may be here temporarily, but they need the gospel, they need a church, now why...?' 'No, I don't think so.'

The board meeting lasted a long time. Called the next meeting for the next Sunday night. The upshot of it all was a resolution. The resolution was offered by one of the relatives of the chairman of the board and the resolution basically was this: 'Members will be admitted to this church from families who own property in the county.'

It was unanimous except for my vote, and I was reminded I couldn't vote. 'They won't fit in, they won't fit in.'

Since we've been back, I wanted to take Nettie, my wife, up to see the scene of my early failures. Had a hard time finding the church because of Interstate 40 through there and all that now but I finally found the road, the county road, and back nestled in the pines, still there, shining white, just beautiful. Just like it was except now cars and trucks were parked everywhere, just everywhere. And a big sign out front [that had replaced the old church sign]: 'Barbecue. All you can eat, chicken, ribs, pork.'

I said, 'Well, we might as well go in for lunch. Went inside, they still had those beautiful lamps hanging on the wall, beautiful oil lamps, still had that old pump organ, one of the kids had to stand there and pump it while it was being played in the service. Beautiful; now it's decoration. The pews which had been cut from a single poplar tree were around the walls, and people waiting to get seated at a table; there were a lot of those aluminum-legged plastic tables. And the place was full of all kinds of people.

Listen, there were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, dwellers of Mesopotamia. And I said to Nettie, 'It certainly is good this is not a church now. These folk would not be welcome. They wouldn't fit in'" ("May I Also Be Included?" *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, 224-225).

You see, the paradox is that when we make an "exclusive" commitment to the kingdom of God, we are in fact committed to *inclusivity* – because Jesus was. (Rohr, *Simplicity*, 80).

What if our churches dared to look like what we know God's banquet table looks like?

In another place and another time, Jesus imagined God's kingdom "like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind" – all shapes, all colors, all sizes, all persuasions (Matthew 13:47).

Here, he says, "The kingdom of God is like a great, big banquet, and you might just be surprised who is on the guest list!"

It might just include those we believe to be unworthy. It might just include those with whom we disagree. It might just include those who sprinkle at baptism instead of dunking!

It might just include those of different races and nationalities and political persuasions. It might just include those who voted the other direction than us last election.

It might just include those whose lives and loves don't look just like ours.

It might just include people who love cats – shocking, I know.

It might just include tax collectors and prostitutes and gamblers and addicts.

It might even include that jerk from Denver who decided to stand directly across the river from me and fish my water.

Wouldn't it be a shame if our church had to become a restaurant to make God's dream come true?

Amen.