

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 14:1-24 **“God’s A-List”**

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(3rd Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 14:1-24 "GOD'S A-LIST"

14:1-6 (L) 5 Words For Meals, 4 Table Talks

Chreia	A. vv.1-6 JESUS EXPOSES A CREDIBILITY GAP WITH A HEALING: LOVE OF NEIGHBOR.	
1	One sabbath when he went TO EAT BREAD at THE HOUSE of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him (hostility). <i>And he them! Earlier Conflicts With Pharisees At 5:29, 6:7, Meal 7:36-50, 11:37-54</i>	Symposium Meal + Teach //Sirach 31:12-19, 32:1-13
2	1 And behold , there was a man before him who had dropsy (Gk. <i>hydropikos</i> = edema/, Lev. 13:2).	16:14, Dropsy (1)
3	2 And Jesus spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it <i>lawful</i> to heal on the sabbath, or not?"	Question (2)
4	3 But they were silent.	Pious Avoidance Of Compassion, Response: Silence (3)
5	1' Then he took (hold of) him and healed him, and let him go.	//13:32 Mission, Man Without Dropsy (1')
6	2' And he said to them, "Which of you, having a child or AN OX that happens to fall into a well, will not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?"	Question (2')
	3' And they could not reply to this.	Dt. 5:14, CD 11:13-14 , <i>bTShab</i> 117b(No Help/Help) <i>No power to reply, Sin = Misuse Sabbath, Response Of Silence (3')</i> God's Party! Shame/Honor Critical In 1 st Century
Analogy	B. vv.7-11 GUESTS: WARNING TO STATUS SEEKERS AT MEAL. 14:7-11 (Luke Only)	
7	Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them,	11x <i>Called</i> (kaleo) //Prov. 25:6-7, Sir. 3:7-10 Mt. 23:6, Seated By Rank, Social Critique
8	1 "Whenever you are invited by any one to a marriage feast ,	Hypothetical No. 1
	2 do not sit in the place of honor, <i>lest</i> a more eminent man than you be invited by him;	11:43, Sin = Hankering After Honor If Seek Honor, Neglect Poor
9	3 and he who invited you both come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,'	4 Paragraphs Of Subversion If Embarrassed Now, How Much More Then!
	4 and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.	
10	1' But when you are invited,	Subvert The Social Map, Hypothetical No. 2
	2' go and sit in the lowest place,	Only Consider Human Opinion, Not God's
	3' so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher';	
Judgment	4' then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you."	
11	For everyone who exalts himself will <i>be</i> humbled, and he who humbles himself will <i>be</i> exalted."	p.v. (by God) HOW GOD ACTS: REVERSAL OF FORTUNE
Analogy	B' vv.12-14 HOST: WARNING TO SOCIAL CLIMBERS AT MEAL. 14:12-14 (Luke Only)	
12	1 He said also to the man who had invited him, "Whenever you give a dinner or a banquet ,	Up Close, Confrontive With The Prophet! Elite Only, Rule Of Reciprocity, Self-Seeking Host: Future Status
	2 do not invite your friends or your brothers, or your kinsmen, or your rich neighbors,	4 Insider Groups People Who Can Reciprocate
	3 <i>lest</i> they also invite you in return,	
	4 and you be repaid in kind.	In The Here And Now, Sin = Neglect Of Poor
13	1' But when you give a feast (reception),	4:18-19, 4 Excluded From Priesthood (Lev. 21:17-21)
	2' invite <i>the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind</i> .	4 Not-Blessed, Dt. 14:29, 7:22, IQSa 2:5-6, 1QM 7:7
14	3' And you will <i>be blessed</i> (happy) because they cannot repay you.	v.15b, HOW GOD ACTS
	4' You will <i>be</i> repaid at the resurrection of the just."	p.v. 6:36, AT END OF THE AGE Honor Who God Honors, //6:32-35
	A' vv.15-24 JESUS EXPOSES A CREDIBILITY GAP WITH A PARABLE: LOVE OF GOD.	
15	When one of those who sat (reclined) at table with him heard this, he said to him, " Blessed (happy) is he who shall EAT BREAD in the kingdom of God."	7 Speeches //Mt. 22:1-14, GT 64 13:29, Hollow, Pious Blessing/ Congratulations Of Course! But Who's Invited? Will They Accept?
Example	16 But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet , and he invited many .	2-Stage Invitations Common, <i>Sent</i> (3x)
	17 And he sent his servant at the hour of the banquet to say, 'Come! Because all is now ready!'	Honor-bound, Joy Of Host
	18 But they all alike began to make excuses.	3 Reasons Not Join Holy War, Dt.. 20:5-7, m. Sotah 8:1-6
	2a The first said to him, "I have bought a field,/ and I must go out and see it./	Property (\$) (Lev. 20:6)
	I pray you have me excused.//	3 Concerned For Wealth/Status/ Upward Mobility
19	2b And another said, 'I have bought FIVE YOKE OF OXEN ,/ and I go to test them./	3/3/2, Expensive
	I pray you have me excused.//	Livestock (\$) (Lev. 20:6)
20	2c And another said, 'I have married a bride,/' (ellipsis: the need to be elsewhere!) Brief And Rude! Dt. 20:7, 24:5	
	and therefore- I cannot come.// (Punch Line! Knowing Silence!) Able To Marry (\$) (Lev. 20:7)	
21	So the servant reported this to the master.	Caught Up In Possession/People, Cares Of This World Insults All, Social Revolution, Sin = Reject Jesus' Invitation
	2'a Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly, into the streets and lanes of the city. Bring in the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. '	Anger v.13b, No Attachments! Urban Poor, The Not-Blessed
22	And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still here is room.'	Party Now!
23	2'b And the master said to the servant, //13:28-30, 2:32, World Upended, Still Happening! Is. 15:3, 49:6	
Conclusion	'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to enter, that MY HOUSE may be filled.'	
24	1 For I tell you (<i>you all</i>), none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet .'	Rev. 19:9 Accept Invitation!

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 14:1-24

This thought unit has four parts in a concentric format (A. vv.1-6, B. vv.7-11 // B' vv.12-14, A' vv.15-24). The first three paragraphs are unique to Luke (L). The fourth has a parallel in Matthew 22:1-14 (Q source). The editing together of diverse materials (a healing, a parable, a speech on kingdom etiquette, a concluding parable) is from Luke's hand. All sections share a meal theme (vv.1, 7-8, 12-13, 15-17, 24); in fact, Luke uses five terms for such gatherings (*eat bread, marriage feast, dinner, banquet, reception*). The language of invitation (*kaleo* = called/invited) is throughout (11x). The literary type is an ancient symposium where a meal is followed by discussion, only here Jesus is the sole presenter! Prior meals with Pharisees (6:6-11, 7:36-50, 11:37-54) and earlier sabbath healings (6:6-11, 13:10-17) make the scene familiar. Inclusions to open and close the unit are *to eat bread* (v.1 // v.15b), *house* (v.1 // v.23), *an ox/ five yoke of oxen* (v.5a // v.19). In the frames (A//A') Jesus exposes credibility gaps with a healing (vv.1-6 = love of neighbor) and parable (vv.15-24 = the love of God); the double center (B//B') warns guests on status seeking (vv.7-11) and hosts on guest lists (vv.12-14). The kingdom, previewed in Jesus and consummated in resurrection (v.14b), is the upending of this world's status schemes. All stand before God, not just each other. All bear the image; all are sinners living behind enemy lines; all are subject to physical and moral sickness; all are invited to enter the kingdom by following Jesus and learning his Father-centered and Spirit-empowered world view. This is the God who heals the sick (v.4b), who honors and dishonors (v.11), who repays love (v.14), who invites all but excludes based on our responses (v.24). Who we invite and don't offers a social map we inhabit and often fiercely defend; Jesus redraws the map to match God's future reality. Will we?

The setting is a sabbath meal at the home of an elite ruler whose theology and practice is Pharisaic. Hostility is present; one suspects the man with dropsy (i.e. edema) is a plant since Jesus dismisses him after the healing. In our world we question non-medical healings; here the crowd assumes Jesus heals, the issue being: Will he violate protocol? Will his guard an important identity marker? The story has two stanzas (vv.2-4, vv.5-6), each with three parts (problem, question, silence // cure, question, silence). As expected, Jesus heals the man with a touch. A neighbor is restored as a sign of the Father's rule and the Spirit's power. Their initial silence and final inability to reply are noted; God has backed Jesus with power so as to answer the two questions (vv.3, 5). Sabbath is not just a day for work boundaries to be enforced but a day for the works of love. If your child or ox, why not this poor, swollen man? Why wait till tomorrow?

Now that Jesus is seen as the one God backs, and since his interlocutors sit in angry silence, he speaks based on his close observation of their jockeying for honor. Section B has an introduction (v.7), two parallel stanzas (vv.7-9, 10-11), each with four parts (1. invitation, 2. seating choice, 3. verdict of host, 4. shame or honor), and a conclusion on God's action (v.11). It's OK to attend feasts, but keep an eye on the ultimate host (v.11) and dare to risk defiance of custom as a witness. This is not just a restatement of Prov. 25:6-7 but an upending of such systems in silent social protest. Sit with the dropsical man. Honor that lasts comes from God. Having addressed invitees who are future hosts, Jesus now addresses his host, *a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees*. His speech again has two-stanzas (vv.12, 13-14), each with four parts (1. feast planned, 2. who to invite, 3. reciprocity, 4. benefit), plus a conclusion on God's action (v.11). Four included groups (v.12b) are contrasted with four excluded (*the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame*) who bring no honor and cannot reciprocate. If we honor whom God honors, we show ourselves in line with the new reality (v.14); our choice will be blessed (v.14b). We live by the new map. The concluding parable is Jesus' corrective response to a pious exclamation (v.15) which assumes all present will enjoy the kingdom. Jesus' potent parable features the excuses of three who refuse the second call. The householder then goes for the neglected and the outsiders to fill the banquet hall. A blessing (vv.14, 15b) and the excluded groups (vv.13b, 21c) link sections B'/A'. Our responses are link to our fates (v.24).

GOD’S A-LIST

“You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

Faith awaits its reward.

Angels do not have to eat. They are sustained, perhaps- and here I speculate- by the direct fullness of God’s own uncreated life, much as a solar cell is energized by rays of the sun. But we, with a mouth and esophagus, a stomach and bowels, are designed as food processors and created to be dependent on the earth, its topsoil and plants, its aquifers and animals and air. We draw energy not directly but from outside sources injected. Too much food and we blow up in obesity; too little and we dry up in starvation. “Give us this day our daily bread” is not just the prayer of Jesus-followers but of every hungry belly round the globe. All us critters are dependent on the earth and its fecundity in a way our friends the angels are not. They are spirits, meaning non-embodied personal presence and intelligence. Not *disembodied*, as if they lost something they once had- as we will in the interim between our death and the resurrection of the dead¹- but *non-embodied*, never having had a physical body like ours. They are *non-embodied* personal presence and intelligence; and we are *embodied* personal presence and intelligence. We have gender and stomachs; they have neither. We have tables and gardens and kitchens; they do not need them, nor do they sleep as we do since it is our bodies that tire. The good ones, even when on mission, keep their eyes on God and the loving energy provided; the fallen ones, however, who now serve the Evil One as subjects, are always facing away in the permanent direction of rebellion, and so their once-charged batteries have been running down for eons and will one day run out totally. Their doom is sure. Speculation on such matters is great fun.

But bodies need food, and food is more than fuel. Food is a deep bond between people and the occasion for the development of complex social rituals. The kitchen is where people tend to gravitate, as in the proverb, “No matter where I serve my guests, they seem to like my kitchen best.” Manners and etiquette spring up around

¹ On the classic Christian hope of a two stage post-mortem existence, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

food, the proper and improper ways to eat together. Occasions demand setting a table set properly, flowers, a head chair, perhaps a toast, and everyone in their places. Think of the family table at Thanksgiving. Or the rehearsal party for a wedding. Many of our richest memories are associated with eating, as the Methodists say, “If we hadn’t of et’, we wouldn’t a’ met!” Baptists show up at heaven’s gate Bible in hand, Methodists with a covered dish! Eating alone is different from eating with others, so different many seniors have to be encouraged to eat once they eat most of their meals alone. They say to me, “Cooking for one is hard.” And that’s because our appetite is not just for carbohydrates and protein but for fellowship and lively conversation over a common meal. And for us Christians food may by God’s grace become the *soul food* of the sacrament in which we eat a ritual meal with one another and there find mysterious communion with the risen Jesus who feeds us his own undying life, his body and his blood. Food is necessary fuel. Food is pleasure and taste and aroma and texture and anticipation. Food is celebration and enhanced by music and dancing. There is *eating* and there is *dining*; there is *feasting* and there is *fasting*, all different in nuance because of what we do, or don’t do, with food.

What we eat and with whom is a social map of class and kinship. We all know what it means to receive an invitation to a banquet a step or two above our status. We worry about the number of forks and whether our attire is appropriate. But most of our meals are with *folk like us*, whatever *like us* means in your corner of the world. Up or down the social ladder we feel the quiver of anxiety. To discover this you only need ask, When is the last time you invited a poor person for a meal in your home? Or when is the last time you had a leisurely meal and conversation in the home of a person of another race? To eat together is to affirm common humanity, and we are careful about being vulnerable with just any one. Eat with someone, and your life may get tangled up with theirs in ways you could not predict. You hear their story and see how it differs from your own. Bridges are built.

So when we read in Luke that Jesus was criticized for eating with the wrong people,² remember that every meal and guest list in that world is a richly textured social map of who’s *in* and who is *out*, who’s first class and who’s second and who has no class at all, who we take responsibility for and who we don’t, who thinks like

² Luke 15:1-2.

us and who doesn't.³ And since for Jews every meal also had religious meaning as a possible preview of the ultimate banquet in God's kingdom, you can see how complicated it all gets. Eating's not just about food. It's about God and piety and status and our religious sub-group. So we shouldn't be too surprised when Luke takes a healing story, two parables and a moral exhortation and weaves them together around the theme of a meal with a discussion, or as the Greeks would say, a *symposium*. Lie around on couches, eat a meal, drink wine and discuss theology- a *symposium*. It was most often a spirited dialog, but here a spirited monolog. Only Jesus talked because the whole thing started badly. They set him up for a public fall from honor, and when he showed off with a healing that showed who God backed on the sabbath questions, they shut up in angry silence. He then gave them a lecture on their behavior and what God thought of it. Jesus is on a roll!

TURNING TO THE TEXT

A. Compassion On The Sabbath (vv.1-6).

Verse 1 gives us a sabbath meal, and the main course is *roast Jesus*. "And they were watching him," says Luke. But it is not he who gets toasted. Test Jesus and you get tested. Read God's book, and it will start reading you. It's what it means to engage God in the flesh; you always lose, which means paradoxically you always win because two things always happen with Jesus: 1) the truth is told, and 2) grace and mercy are offered for a new life with him. It is dangerous to invite Jesus into your heart or your home or your business or your politics or your marriage or even into your church. He is disruptive and will not behave. He meddles. Jesus will expose and ridicule whatever in your head and heart is not of God. He sees through our little games. He does not have good manners; he does not follow our rules; he picks fights and exposes sin and will embarrass you something terrible because he cares nothing for your reputation and everything about the you that is underneath all the stuff. No secret is hidden from his gaze. In frustration I sometimes cry out, "Can just leave me alone for a while!" Then I pray, "No sir, please don't. Keep messin' with me till the job's done and I'm content to live in the light of your truth and love. Amen." So if you've not been humiliated by the Lord, you haven't walked with him very far. I

³ On the macro-structures of cities and classes in the ancient world, see Richard Rohrbaugh, "The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations," in Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *Social World of Luke-Acts: Models For Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 1991, 25-49, which includes a sociological analysis of 14:15-24.

identify with the bad guys in this story, the Pharisees. Hanging around Jesus is devastating for your ideas of success and safe little social circle.

The courage and love of Jesus are first seen in his eating with his enemies. The Pharisees were after him; he knew it and went anyway. They were angry at his alternative vision of who God was and what it meant to be a true Jew. They had the weight of precedent; he had spiritual authority. They had rules to follow and rabbis to quote; he had healings to offer. When you think you have the inside track on God and run the religious show- as they did, and then someone like Jesus shows up, it's disturbing. Verse 1, "One sabbath Jesus went to eat bread at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, *and they were watching him.*"

Whether the man with edema was a plant or not we don't know, but it appears so because he would have been considered ritually unclean. Tight skin, swollen extremities, labored breathing. Probably the result of some horrible sin, or so they thought. Full of fluid, yet craving more, a living contradiction. That was the dropsical man, what we call *edema*. But they were full of pride and yet craved even more status and honor, so what he was visibly and physically, they were morally. He's a picture of them and the healing they need. It's why Luke placed the healing first. He intended it to be read at more than one level, literally and symbolically. In the moral discourse of Jesus' day a man swollen with edema was often used as a symbol for the rich and greedy who already had enough, yet craved more.⁴

As soon as Jesus saw the man with dropsy he knew what the Father wanted to do and the power the Spirit would supply. He saw it ahead of time by divine revelation.⁵ And so with inside knowledge from an invisible source, he deliberately posed the first theological question of the day, "Is it lawful *to heal* on the sabbath or not?" The Pharisees could not ask the question that way because they could not heal. They might ask, "Is it lawful to *help* an ox or your child out of a ditch on the sabbath or not?" but only Jesus could use the word *heal* in more than a hypothetical sense. They didn't say a word. It was a matter of debate at the time how much aid one could give on the sabbath. And with them watching, Jesus took hold of the man, healed

⁴ On physical conditions as metaphors for vices and their effects in ancient moral philosophy, see Chad Hartsock, "The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Lk. 14:1-6) and the Lucan Landscape," *Biblical Interpretation* 21 (2013), 341-354.

⁵ John 5:19, 30.

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him, and let him go. No confession of sin required; no history taken, just compassion on the Lord's Day, a preview of the coming new world. If they would pull a son or ox out of a well, why not a man? "And they could not reply to this." They cared about the rules but were empty when it came to compassion. And they didn't like surprises! There was no joy a bloated man was now whole, just guilty silence and seething anger. They were exposed, and that is what Jesus does best; he lays us bare.

Hang around Jesus and the first thing he will expose is lack of compassion. He will reveal just how carefully circumscribed is your safe little circle of care. Jesus hates loveless religion. And if you walk with him, he will send a steady stream of people across your path who have all kinds of needs, messes every one. For years I saw them as my duty and in need of my expertise. But something happened in my heart. They are no longer problems to be fixed but people who need whatever mercy and love and wisdom and healing God can pour through me at the moment. Sometimes I receive more than I give. I don't have to be the last link in the chain of God's care, just the next. It is the love that dwells in the Trinity that rules the universe, and to open your heart to be a conduit of that love is to risk becoming as dangerous and offensive as Jesus because it is not how our world is organized.

Leave it to Mother Theresa to put it into words. She was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?"

She thought about the question, gave her interviewer a puzzled look, then said, "I don't remember the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts."⁶

A Yes to compassion, especially when it's inconvenient, is a Yes to Jesus. And when you're moved to compassion and quench it out of wondering what others will say, it's a big No. One way or the other we do it every day. Some need a listening ear, others a helping hand, some a shoulder to cry on or some sound and loving counsel from Scripture; some need money or a referral, but all need prayer and encouragement and a welcome into the fellowship of the church. To occasionally get it right and step into the flow of Jesus' compassion for people is to get a taste of heaven's joy. Keeps me in the ministry. Had one recently that left me amazed.

There he lay, a good ole boy with a leg squished by a Harley that fell on him in the front yard. t enough speed to stay upright, not enough strength to keep it from

⁶ www.sermonillustrations.com/nti/luke/14_1and7-14.html.

tipping over. Nearly bled to death before they got the bike off his lower leg. An old friend with whom he'd recently *had words* just stood there watching him bleed. Now that's cold!

Well, I was trying to assess his support system and asked, "That girlfriend you told me about a minute ago, is she committed to you?"

"Not sure, preacher, been off and on about two years. And oh, I forgot the part about her being married-n-all."

I thought, "This is interesting," then asked, "Does her husband know?"

"Which one?"

"What do you mean, *which one*?"

"Well, she's married to two now and running around with me."

"Married to two and shackin' with you." I thought it was poetic to make my pastoral summary rhyme. "I know monogamy and bigamy, but this is something new; let's me and you call it *trigamy*," and we both started laughing. I think I saw the Lord wink at me, "I was here before you got here."

"Isn't bigamy against the law?"

"Yea, but she's a free woman, preacher, and loves my Harley, but I've got to sell it or I'm gonna starve."

"Why have those two husbands not shot you yet?"

"Well, to tell truth, I don't sleep so good at night. Real light and all, wondering when the door hinge will creak and I'll see a man with a nine millimeter in his hand."

"Your life's kind of complicated I see." In the business we call that *reflective listening*. When I found out he'd been baptized as a child in a rural Methodist Church and never moved his membership, I said, "You're one of our lost sheep, and the Lord send me to help you back to the fold." He smiled.

"Would you let me pray for the blood clots in both legs?"

"Sure, I need it. My brother died of a clot in his leg. Hit by a limb when cutting timber. Died in fifteen minutes. Pain in his chest, and he was gone."

"Doesn't that scare you since you've got two and are involved in some serious sin? You know you can go to hell for adultery, don't you? It's in *the big ten*. Undermining someone else's polygamist marriages is serious before the Lord!"

"You close your eyes, and I'll pray." I did with my hand on his shoulder, then asked, "What came to mind while I prayed? Anything with the legs?"

"Just one. I need to turn back to God and go back to church."

"That's counts as a touch from God. Low livin is hard livin, isn't it?" He agreed. We talked for a few minutes more, and I promised to return. I then did something strange and not recommended. I stood at the foot of his bed and put my hands on the handlebars of an imaginary Harley. I then made my best motorcycle

sound and burnt a wheelie on the way out the room. When I looked back he was laughing. Jesus healed the man with dropsy, and I found a lost sheep with two swollen legs. It was a good start.

B/B' Guests And Hosts (14:7-11, 12-14)

Humility is a strange virtue; as soon as you recognize it you lose it. It's the opposite of self-promotion. Humility is skeptical of all conventions that rank people over one another. The humble are not self-absorbed; there's room in their view for others.

The next thing Jesus did, after he healed the man with dropsy, was expose and attack the guests. At such a meal there was a strict *pecking order* to the seating, and Jesus- the humble one- was watching as each vied for the higher status seats. It was a window into the human heart and our deepest fears that we really do not matter. We must prove we count, and we use others as rungs on our ladder. One-upmanship, social-climbing, name-dropping, status-seeking, buying things not because of their usefulness but so others will notice, snob-value: all are symptoms of the same disease. "Look at me, I'm important, and I'm more important than you which is why I'm taking the best seat next to the host.

So Jesus told a story of a man invited to a marriage feast. He took a seat higher than he deserved and was then demoted to his shame. A better strategy would be to take the low place and then wait for the host to promote you in front of everyone. Now left to itself this story works within the social hierarchy as a smart way to avoid shame and gain honor. "This is how to get what you want." But Jesus did not just tell the story and leave it at that; he also added a punch line, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted," the implication being that it's God and not man who pulls up and puts down. So if you look to people for status, you're looking in the wrong place. The real issue is not where I stand on *your* guest list but where I stand *with God*. Am I one he can lift up, or one he must put down? And when the issue is God, there's no room for self-promotion or pride. Humility lives with a constant eye on God. To nurture humility is not to think badly of yourself so much as keep a constant inward eye on the Lord.

On day Mister Rogers was making a trip to California and decided to pay a visit to a teenager with cerebral palsy. At first the boy was made nervous by the thought Mister Rogers was about to visit, so nervous that when Mr. Rogers arrived, the young man got mad at himself and began hating and hitting himself. His mother

was forced to take him into another room. Mister Rogers waited patiently, and when the boy came back, he said, “I would like to ask you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?”

On his computer, the boy said, “Yes.”

“I would like for you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?”

The boy was *thunderstruck*; no one every asked him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed *for*, always the object of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers. And although at first he didn’t know if he could, he said he’d try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn’t talk about wanting to die anymore because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, it must mean God likes him too.

The writer of the story, Tom Junod, asked Mister Rogers how he knew what to say to make the boy feel better.

He responded, “Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayer for *him*; I asked for *me*. Anyone who’s gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his *intercession*.”⁷

That’s humility, but if you told Mister Rogers he would deny it and say it was simply the truth. And that’s also humility. “Would you be mine, Could you be mine, Won’t you be my neighbor?”

And then, having corrected the guests and exposed their status seeking, Jesus turned his gaze to the host, a ruler of the Pharisees, and proceeded to give him a lecture on his entertainment habits. What a rude young man this Jesus is. Invite him in, and he takes over. Apparently he cares nothing for the rules of polite Southern company. Jesus is uppity!

Have you ever received a gift knowing you had to give one in return or be thought ungrateful? It wasn’t a gift but a trade. Or a dinner invitation? If you accepted, it’s your turn next. Tit for tat. I do for you, and you do for me as a two-way flow. Social scientists call it *balanced reciprocity*, and it is opposed to *general reciprocity* which means serving or giving with no expectation of payback, a one-way flow.⁸ It’s how we build a circle of friends with whom we feel comfortable. But it automatically excludes those who can’t play our game. They are permanently left

⁷ Wendy Murray Zoba, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2000, 45.

⁸ Lyle Story, “One Banquet With Many Courses,” *JBPR*, Vol. 4, 2012, 77.

out. And in first century Jewish society it was four categories: *the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame*. The non-blessed, the invisible, the excludable. They were the outcasts on no one's guest list. Now from our vantage point we would want to exclude *the poor* from this list, because the other three hang together as physical disabilities over which people have no control: *the maimed, the blind and the lame*. But Jesus listed them together because he knew that land use and the politics and the absentee landlords and the Roman occupation forces kept the poor as locked in poverty as the blind were in darkness. There is some hope in America that a poor man or woman may, through hard work and education, work themselves out of poverty. That was just not possible in Jesus' day. First century Israel was not democratic America with a free enterprise system; there was no widespread hope of upward mobility and no expanding opportunities. Life was a zero-sum game.

You may change the names from *the poor and the maimed and the blind and the lame* into whatever current categories you wish, but we all know that there are still groups and categories of people who are excluded from our parties and our gatherings and our churches and from our circle of care, mainly those whom we consider different in some way. And even though society has made great progress in the public sphere, most of us still live within the small circle of people who are pretty much *just like us*, trading social courtesies with *our kind of people* and knowing all the while where the boundaries are. No reward in that, says Jesus. You get paid back *now*. You get cared for *now*. But it takes faith to immerse yourself in a world that is not upwardly mobile and for which the payoff can only come from God. So Jesus calls for a very different guest list. A church that does not just wait passively for people to come but actively works to invite and include the poor, the uneducated and unsophisticated, the mentally ill and the socially uncouth, the addicted and disabled. If they are somehow on the edge and not at the center of our life, Jesus commands us to include them so that the church looks very different from other organizations in the community. As a church we have to be *ahead of the times*, and a church that could embrace the classes and the masses, the well-off and the poor, the up-and-outs and down-and-outs has a chance to become a living laboratory of God's kingdom, learning to live with Jesus in ways that stretch us all.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen made this confession, "Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes against my inclination, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am

a part.”⁹ So if you live in a bubble of people just like yourself, there may not be much of God in your life now. The call is to order our lives based on God’s valuing of people, not what we have learned from our culture and comfort zones. It’s hard, but it’s the Jesus way. The great evangelist George Whitefield pondered these matters and wrote his convictions in a prayer that is sobering even to read:

“O heavenly Father, for Thy dear Son’s sake, keep me from climbing. Let me hate preferment. For Thine infinite mercies’ sake, let me love a low contemptible life, and never think to compound matters between the happiness of this world and the next.”¹⁰

Thus far Jesus has disrupted a dinner with an act of compassion and a call for humility that looks to God for rewards, not to people. He demolishes a social structure and points to a new world which is a threat to our current ways. The room was full of tension and social dis-ease. The silence was awkward, and so, as often happens, someone broke the silence by saying something inane and obvious, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God,” which loosely translated means, “Won’t it be great when heaven comes and all of us are there for the big party.”

So for a second time Jesus told a story about a banquet, this time given by a rich man. As is customary in the Middle East, multiple invitations go out, first a general invitation to predict the numbers, then a second when the banquet is ready and the fatted-calf cooked, “Come! Because all is now ready.” They said they would come, but when the time came, each made a flimsy excuse.

“I must inspect some property.”

“I must test my oxen.”

“I have married a bride, and she needs my time!”¹¹

⁹ *The New Oxford Review*, April 1987, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, No. 5.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Illustrations* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 214.

¹¹ On the innuendo of the third line as a window in Jesus’ possible earthy humor, see Bruce W. Longnecker, “A Humorous Jesus? orality, structure, and characteristics in Luke 14:15-24 and beyond,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16, No. 2, 2008, 179-204. Other treatments include Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 299-326; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 88-113.

Not bad things but good things. Taking care of business in the market place and at home. First things first. Truth is the banquet was not a priority. God’s call was ignored; they had better things to do. It was the prophets of Israel who issued the first invitation, “God is preparing a banquet.” Then Jesus came, “Come, because all is now ready.” Many elites made excuses since Jesus was below them in the social rankings. So he turned to the outcasts: *the poor and maimed and blind and the lame*. They came, and still there was room. So the church reached out beyond the bounds of Judaism to bring in the Gentiles from the highways and hedges, which is how all of us got it! God, you see, wants a full house and will take in anyone who accepts the invitation.

Compassion, humility, looking to God and not to people for significance, being downwardly mobile and open to God’s invitation whenever it comes: this is what it means to follow Jesus. It’s not life as we know it with a religious veneer glued on for appearances. It is a world of strange new priorities and practices that go against the grain of most of what we’ve been taught about how to make it in the world. A life which squelches compassion, a life concerned about jockeying for social status, a life that hides from those who cannot enhance our resumes is a life that will ultimately refuse God’s invitation to the kingdom. It simply has better things to do. More property, more production, more pleasures, more meals with the right kind of people. The incessant inflation of the self. And its judgment is as obvious as it is tragic, “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet.” It’s not that God excludes us but that we exclude ourselves by our habits of mind and heart that make God’s call a bother and God’s kingdom an annoyance. God’s call is the enemy not just of our worst but also of our best human projects, among which are work and marriage if they take first place in our hearts. New property, new oxen, a new bride: it doesn’t matter so long as it keeps you from God’s table where Jesus is the guest of honor. These men were not wicked in the conventional sense of doing evil, just distracted by opportunities to get ahead and have a little fun. And when the banquet begins, they won’t be there because they have better things to do. It is *the good life without God* that may be the devil’s cleverest and most effective temptation here in modern America. It entangles so many. Since money and leisure are two of our favorite false gods, to speak against them is to be labeled a party-pooper.

CONCLUSION

I’m sorry. The church cannot be the chaplain to the culture and bless things as they are. The church is not the kingdom; we are not the perfect society practicing

compassion and humility at all times. But we are to bear witness to the kingdom that is ahead and, so far as God allows, give people a glimpse of what it might look like by the way we live together. While we point ahead, we are ourselves being constantly judged and reformed. So to be part of what God is going in the world, you have to be part of *the community through which he's doing it*, which means some imperfect local church like Main Street or Fire Baptized Holiness Deliverance Tabernacle Of The Blessed Virgin Mary Beside the Laundry Mat. It is in the church, and only here, that week by week we hear this contrary and hopeful biblical word from God and get our bearings right once again. It is here that we learn compassion and humility and faith and how to say Yes to God's invitations which so often come disguised as annoying interruptions in our busy, important lives.

I need your help for an upcoming project I'm calling *No Excuse Sunday*. If you can help with any of the following, please let me know:

“A *cot* will be in the sanctuary for those who say that Sunday is their only day to sleep in. *Visine* will be provided for those who watched TV too late Saturday night to get to church on Sunday. We will have *steel helmets* for those who fear the roof will cave in if they return after a long absence. *Blankets* will be furnished for those who claim it is too cold and fans for those for whom it is always too hot. One hundred *TV dinners* are needed for those who simply can't come to church and cook dinner too. *Trees, grass and sand* will be placed in the aisles for those who find God in nature, and a *small putting green* near the altar for those who claim that Sunday is their only day to play golf. Finally, the church will be decorated with Christmas *poinsettias* and Easter *lilies* for those who have never seen the sanctuary without them.”¹²

Christian faith is not about being comfortable and coddled and catered to. That's American consumerism not Christian discipleship. It's not one more item on the resume of a good life. It's about following a disturbing man named Jesus, and with him nothing and no one's safe.¹³ So give up your excuses; follow Jesus Christ with all you are. Say Yes to compassion; say No to status-seeking and social-

¹² Modified from “No Excuses,” *Parables, etc.*, April 1991, 5.

¹³ For a primer, see Mark Scandrette, *Practicing The Way Of Jesus: Life Together in The Kingdom Of Love* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011).

climbing. Have lots of friends, but also choose to involve yourself with those on the underside. What we are talking about is learning to see ourselves and others through the eyes of Jesus, and what makes that so hard is that all our habits of mind and heart must be reprogrammed. Kingdom lenses reveal a whole new world.

Heidi and her husband Roland Baker are- by all accounts- modern apostles. I do not know her, but I know people who do, and they say her books on miracles are true.¹⁴ I may have a chance to hear her in August. She ministers to the poor in Mozambique and writes about a vision she once had:

“I saw the wedding feast of the Lamb. There were huge, long tables laid out with the most beautiful food I have ever seen. I heard the Lord say, ‘Wake up, Church! Wake up, Church! The feast is about to begin! The poor have not yet been called, and My house is not yet full. I want My house to be full!’”

Then I saw the Lord Jesus dance on the garbage dump, and I was with Him. As He called, the children and youth began to follow and dance with us. Together, Jesus and I would stop and touch them; their bloated bellies would become flat, and their infected wounds healed. Their hair, brown by malnutrition, would become black and shiny.

He put beautiful garments... on them. He led them out of the dump and into the wedding feast, ‘You sit in front!’ And the hungry children from the garbage dump sat at the head table. I've worked in the garbage dump ever since, and many hundreds of children and youth have met the Lord and are being fed physical and spiritual bread.”¹⁵

I think she's onto something, and I think I know where it comes from.

¹⁴ As an example, Heidi Baker, *Birth of the Miraculous* (Lake Mary, FLA: Charisma House, 2014).

¹⁵ www.sjcac.org/eng/events/rollandbaker.
