

Sermon Monologue – September 18th, 2022

Written and performed by Zac Klassen

*This is a monologue based on Luke 14. It is performed in the voice of the “leader of the Pharisees” that Jesus visited after being invited to a meal at his house. Given that I am speaking in the voice of a Pharisee, it is worth writing a *disclaimer*. I, a Christian preacher, have done my best to depict the tension or disagreement in this Gospel story between Jesus and this “leader of the Pharisees” in as generous a light as possible while at the same time trying not to undermine the significance of the radical challenge Jesus issued to all he preached to. Too often Christians have spoken and continue to speak of Pharisees in pejorative language and stereotype them as universally stubborn and rebellious Jewish leaders. This stereotype has been a major feature of Christian anti-Judaism for a long time, and I certainly reject such anti-Judaism. In my understanding, Jesus and the Pharisees were actually very close in their attention to the importance of the law and even in many of their interpretations of the law. That said, in this monologue based closely on Luke 14, I want to draw out the ways in which Jesus might have issued a genuine challenge to his hearers, this particular leader of the Pharisees among them, and so also try to draw out the ways that Jesus’ challenge reaches us today in our own context. In our congregation, none of us are Jewish and that is clear. The ethical challenge God gives Jewish people today is something they can speak for themselves regarding. In a Christian congregation of generally socially well-off people, I see this monologue as challenging us to let go of the world “as it is” and embrace Jesus’ vision of a new world breaking in where everyone is welcome at God’s feast.*

Setting

The setting of the monologue is at the leader’s house, just after the dinner guests had left and the leader finds himself sitting at the table, pensive, reflecting on what happened at the meal. There are scraps of food on the table. The slave begins to clean up after the meal. The leader invites the slave to stop, and the leader then begins to address the slave (who goes to sit among the congregation, who now take the part of the slave to whom the leader speaks).

Leader to Slave (and congregation)

“What a dinner that was! Oh, leave this mess for now. Please, sit down instead. I feel like I need to process out loud what just happened and need your ear if you please. Did you see what Jesus did and what he said at Sabbath dinner this evening? Of course, you didn’t! You were busy preparing the food and drink and eating your meal in the corner. Well, did Jesus ever cause a stir! I invited him because many people, including some of my fellow Pharisees (Luke 5:26), have been saying he is a teacher who utters “gracious words” (Luke 4:22), performs amazing deeds, and speaks with authority (Luke 4:32). But not all of us have been so sure about him. He has been the source of some suspicion and controversy and has made some enemies as well.

As leaders in our community, some among us have been a bit worried that his teaching, while gaining in popularity, might be straying from our traditions regarding the proper observance of the law, not to mention undermining our own authority within the community. So, we’ve been

keeping a close eye on him (Luke 14:1). I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, though. After all, I like to debate the law with the best of them. So, I invited him to dine with my friends and associates. And boy did he make an impression! Jesus had hardly stepped foot in the door when he turned to my associate, who had been dealing with painful swelling, and healed him. We all took note of Jesus' actions to cure this man given that it was the Sabbath. Some of us Pharisees debate whether healers should be working on the Sabbath – we all were trying to be mindful of honouring God by resting after all. Jesus, a keen student of the law, however, asked us a question about the Sabbath we couldn't argue with: "If one of you had a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day." He was right, of course. To save a life was following of the law. While the law commanded us to rest on the Sabbath, it also commanded that we show love to our neighbours.

After this, I could see Jesus scan the room. He zeroed in on the couches and the table in the center. At first, I thought he was evaluating the wonderful spread I had provided, but later it became evident that he was more concerned with how my friends were reclining around the table. I watched him, half expecting him to edge his way onto the middle couch, the place of honour, but he reclined across from me, choosing the place of least honour. What was especially unusual at that moment, was that despite being in the place of least honour, everyone turned their heads towards *him*. Now at first this was just socially awkward, but it became especially awkward when Jesus started in on one of his infamous parables as a way of not so subtly calling out my guests for picking the place of honour around the table. He said something like: "Imagine you go to a wedding banquet and assume for yourself the place of honour, but then the host comes in and tells you to move so that someone more honourable than you can have your place. Wouldn't you feel disgraced?" All of us knew he wasn't just talking about any old wedding banquet but about that great banquet when God would gather us all together for the feast to end all feasts. According to Jesus, that banquet would see "all who exalt themselves...be humbled, and those who humble themselves...exalted." (Luke 14:11) My guests got the point, but I felt a bit embarrassed for them and for myself.

But, if chastising my guests wasn't enough, he turned to me next. I guess he had noticed that, aside from him, my guest list was somewhat exclusive. I had invited several people from within my social circles. Yes, its true, they were all well-to-do and yes, some of them were my relatives. But I did not expect Jesus to see anything wrong with this—after all, it was social custom to associate and dine with those who were, well...*like you*. And, it's not like I was being totally exclusive. After all, I had invited Jesus. But that didn't seem to matter. He straight out told me, in the presence of my guests no less (the nerve!), to compose a totally different guest list next time around. No friends, relatives, or rich neighbours. Rather, I was supposed to "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind," because they couldn't "repay me." In that moment, I wanted to snap back at Jesus: "repay me? No one is paying me for this meal, Jesus. Not even you." But, I knew deep down what he was after – after all currency isn't just a coin – and if I'm honest I was hoping that I would be on the exclusive list for the next banquet in my neighbourhood. But the banquet Jesus wanted me to care about was clearly not hosted by my social equals and superiors down the street from me. Like my guests before me, Jesus made it

clear that he wanted me to think first about that great banquet at the “resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:14)

Suddenly one of my other guests spoke up. I couldn't tell if he was trying to break through the social awkwardness or if he was sincerely responding to what Jesus had just said, but my guest raised his glass and said: “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” This was a well-known saying among us and I had thought in that moment that it might *just* have been the break in conversation we needed to move on with our meal according to custom. But apparently this outburst from my guest emboldened Jesus to share yet one more parable. I remember what he said, word for word, because it became crystal clear what he was teaching us through it. Jesus said this:

Luke 14:16-24 "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. 17 At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' 19 Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' 20 Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' 22 And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' 23 Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Now, you may not know this dear slave, but the guests around my table this evening included wealthy landowners, and some with large flocks of animals. And another guest has recently been engaged to be married to a woman belonging to a family of high social standing and political influence. I don't know how Jesus knew these details, but somehow, he read the room. Like I said before, it was clear what he was teaching all of us. We have all been so caught up in maintaining the world as we know it—our banquets and parties, our social status, our wealth, our religious certainties, even our structures of marriage and family—we are so caught up in maintaining this world of ours *as it is*, that we are missing the invitation to a different world, to a world that is coming and has already begun to break in, a world where everyone is welcomed to a great and glorious feast, especially those who have been pushed to the margins of the world as it is now.

You know, I had called and invited Jesus to dinner tonight—I was the host, the one with the power and influence, and Jesus was the guest. But you know what...I think I've realized now that God is calling me to start acting like a humble guest in God's house. Maybe that's what Jesus has been talking about when he preaches about the Kingdom of God. Stop acting like a host who owns the place and who decides who's in and who's out and start taking the lowest place at a banquet where everyone is welcome.

What's that, Dear slave? You're going to find Jesus? You are ready to take up his invitation to God's feast? You want me to come with you? Oh...I don't know. What would my associates say? What if I lose my leadership status? No more lush banquets.... I have a reputation to uphold, you know. You know what you go on....and...and, maybe I'll be there soon....[pensively]....maybe....

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