

Luke 14:1, 7-14

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Because it's Labor Day weekend, I've been thinking about all the various jobs I've had. My earliest jobs were unpaid: cleaning my room, washing dishes, vacuuming and dusting, cleaning bathrooms, mowing, starting dinner after school so that it would be underway when my mother got home from work.

My first *paid* job was babysitting for the neighbor kids: 75 cents an hour—kaching! In junior high I added an after-school paper route, as well as cleaning house once a week for one of my babysitting clients.

The first time I was on an actual payroll was during high school, when I got a job at Hardee's.

As an undergrad I had a work-study job coding data from a clinical study, and when I was in seminary I worked in the Divinity School library as well as having a couple of different internships.

Right after seminary, I married Sam and moved to Charlotte, where he was serving a church. I didn't have a call right away, so I got a job in a grocery store bakery—shaping baguettes, scooping cookie dough, filling pastries.

Since then, I've served as a hospital chaplain, a college chaplain, an interim pastor, and a pastor in churches of many different sizes and in three different denominations. I've served on the Kansas City School Board, and I've raised three children.

The hardest job of all of them—both mentally and even physically, at times—was parenting, and nobody paid me nuthin'!

The worst job—and the only one I hated--was Hardee's, because our manager had us serve French fries and burgers even after they'd been sitting under the heat lamp turning rubbery. I hated being ashamed of what I was serving, having to face the

justifiable complaints from customers, and not being empowered to make things better—because, strangely, my boss wasn't interested in management advice from a seventeen-year-old (though he should have been!).

I mention all of these jobs, because today's passage from Luke is focused on the question of social status; and working lots of different jobs has made me aware of how differently people are looked upon, depending upon the job they have or the uniform they're wearing. I was the same person in every one of those jobs—the same person, whether I was cleaning toilets or flipping burgers or preaching sermons--but in some I was invisible; in others, I was a lowly peon to be yelled-at; and in others, the local paper would call me up to get my opinion about current events. Go figure!

Because we think of ourselves as an egalitarian society, we tend to be uncomfortable with class divisions, even as we buy into them. The society of Jesus' day had no such discomfort. Class distinction was a given; and not just a given, but *God* given. Of *course* some people should be honored above others! But in today's passage we see Jesus pushing back at those assumptions.

He's been invited to a banquet at the home of a Pharisee, but the invitation is as much a trap as an honor. It's the Sabbath, and he has already violated the Sabbath laws by healing a poor, bent-over woman on a day when no work was to be done. We're told at the beginning of this passage that they—the Pharisees—are watching him closely at this banquet. They're hoping to catch him doing something else wrong.

This would be a good time for Jesus to go with the flow until things have settled down a bit, but that's not what he does. Jesus, an honored guest, refuses to embrace that status. Instead, he invites everyone to “listen up,” and then tells a very un-subtle parable that condemns the scramble for position that he sees going on around him. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled,” he says, “and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Let's think, for a moment, about who is listening to this parable. The Pharisees, certainly, as well as other people of position. But let's assume, for a moment, that there are others there, as well—those who are setting the tables and carrying trays and filling-and-refilling drinks. If this is a banquet, then we can be sure that, even though it is the Sabbath, *someone* is working at this Pharisee's house—just not the

Pharisees. But no one notices the workers, or even thinks about the day of rest as it applies to them, because they are invisible.

They are invisible, but they are not blind, and they are not deaf. As anyone who has ever watched “Downton Abbey” knows, they see everything, and they hear everything. I’m guessing Jesus knows that. In fact, I wonder if this parable isn’t more for them than it is for the Pharisees or the other guests.

“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” Jesus says. The guests, I’m sure, heard the snub; but the scullery maid listening at the kitchen door and the serving girls balancing the platters of food must have stood up straighter and walked with new pride in their step.

“When you give a meal,” Jesus says, “don’t invite the rich, who can repay you. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” The guests may have felt a twinge of indigestion at the thought of being elbow-to-elbow with folks like that; but the servants who were scooping out second-helpings while their own stomachs rumbled heard of a reality in which there was a place at the table, even for them.

It was that principle of social leveling on which Jesus built his community of followers. After all, if you were setting up a banquet, where, exactly, would you

seat a fisherman or a tax collector or a political revolutionary or a panhandler or a leper or, God forbid, a woman? But those were the people with whom Jesus surrounded himself. And on those occasions when those very disciples asked him to clarify the seating chart, Jesus refused to even engage the question. His community would be different. And, initially, it was. The early church grew exponentially because it was so revolutionary—the poor, the rich, foreigners and women were all part of the mix, all in it together, and that just couldn't be found anywhere else. People were drawn to that fresh vision of how the world could be.

But then, they kept bringing the everyday world with them. Gradually, and unthinkingly, the church began to reflect the culture around it. The Gospels were written down long after the events they recorded, and so the authors chose to share the particular stories that spoke most clearly to what was happening in the church of *their* time, decades after Jesus. By the fact that Luke includes this particular parable, we can assume that the behaviors that Jesus was witnessing at the Pharisee's dinner party were happening within the church of Luke's day. Those who were movers and shakers outside, were claiming that same status inside, and the "lowlier" members were being pushed aside.

So, when Luke relates this parable of Jesus, the target audience is neither Pharisees nor servants, but members of Jesus' own church. As it is, again, today—because, today, we are the hearers of that parable.

Recently, when Charles and Ashley Greene became members, they mentioned that one of the things that had attracted them here was that, when they were visiting, no one asked them where they lived or where they worked. Those were, apparently, common questions at other places where they'd worshipped. They understood those questions as code for asking about their social status.

I'm glad that wasn't something they encountered here. I'm glad that we value people for something other than the real estate they own or the prestige of their jobs.

But I wonder if we could go further. I wonder if we could model a different way of thinking about the jobs that people do. Rather than avoiding the topic for fear of shaming someone, what if, instead, we expressed respect for *all* honest work, no matter what it pays?

After all, our work—paid or unpaid—takes up a lot of our everyday lives. Not being able to ask about it means ignoring a huge part of each person's

experience—the skills they’ve developed, the interests they have, the obstacles with which they have to contend. It’s important to know these things about one another—as long as we don’t use it to demean or pigeonhole one another. Just because a person is slinging hash doesn’t mean they can’t see a better way of running the whole operation. “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled,” Jesus says, “while those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He should know—this Lord who lived as a servant; this sovereign who was never afraid to get his hands dirty; this Messiah who lived every mundane experience of daily life.

All honest work is honorable work; and all work, no matter how seemingly-menial, can be holy work if we approach it with care for those around us.

But the most holy work of all is a job that we all share: the task of creating a space in which all people matter, and no one is seen as better than others. If the church of Jesus Christ were a banquet at Downton Abbey, Daisy the scullery maid would be giving the orders, while Lord Grantham would be making sandwiches in the kitchen, Lady Mary would be setting up some extra chairs, and the Dowager Countess of Grantham would be heading off down the hall with plunger in hand to clear a blocked toilet. And then, when everything was ready, they would all sit down, together, to eat.

That is Jesus' vision for his church, and we get a clear glimpse of it at this table.

Here, no matter what our title or position may be somewhere else, we eat from the

same loaf. Here, no matter whether we sleep in a mansion or at First Light, we

share the same cup. When we gather here, we come at Jesus' invitation, so feel free

to sit anywhere you want: because it is Jesus who put out the place cards, and they

all say the exact same thing: Child of God.