

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE TOPSY-TURVY WEDDING BANQUET

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

10n 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. 7When 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; 9and 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. 10But 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. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12He 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. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

DIAGNOSIS: “Oh, if I were rich...”

Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem) – *Getting to the Top*

Jesus is invited to lunch at the home of a community leader and while he is there he witnesses something normal: people trying to get ahead. Everyone wants to sit with the “beautiful people,” the ones whose opinion matters and for whom no hurdle is too high because their money can leap over anything. It appears that no one wants to recline to eat in the seats furthest away from the seats of power. The consensus seems to be that only losers eat there, people who have no clout or ambition.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Troublesome Video Playback*

Jesus does not let this phenomenon go unnoticed. He draws the attention of the guests to their own behavior. Jesus is clearly the kind of colleague who can ruin a power lunch. There is something uncomfortable and unpleasant about having our upwardly mobile designs laid bare. But Jesus is relentless. He turns also on the host to point out what is missing from his table: anyone who will never be able to return the favor because they lack the resources and even the prospect of gaining the resources. Jesus makes his host picture the poor and the disabled, those who would surely be seated furthest away even if they were present. Jesus opens the eyes of the blind to see those who appear (themselves with their jostling for influence) and the “desaparecidos” (those who have been disappeared because they weigh down one’s ambitions, one’s conscience, and one’s standard of living). The view of greed and callous disregard that emerges is unflattering. We do not treat one another as human beings; we treat the rich as instruments for our success and we do not treat the poor at all. We let them die. Sadly, this is true

whether we are ourselves rich, poor, or in between.

In making these observations, however, Jesus has twisted the reality, oh so slightly. He transforms the regular lunch to which he has been invited into a wedding feast. This gives his remarks an even deeper significance. A wedding feast is the kind of meal that can really set one back financially. It has to be planned for, budgeted for, borrowed for, paid off later; and the guest list is a delicate matter. A wedding signifies a re-weaving of the web of relationships in a community, and to host a wedding feast requires a re-arrangement and re-prioritization of one's life.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Back to the Bottom*

Jesus is talking about two contrasting meals: the normal lunch that he is eating as a guest and the wedding banquet to which those around him may also be invited. But they have to learn a new set of table manners. At that feast the Host values what they do not and esteems those whom they do not. The Host invites everyone, and if the guests do not keep their vision open to the whole range of people present but instead seek only what they think is the highest place, the Host will send them publicly down to the bottom. This is in fact what Jesus is doing by the open telling of this parable against those at the table with him. He is directing them in shame to the bottom. By acting out the parable, he indicates that it is his own wedding he is telling them about, hosted by his Father, God. He gives them this warning. They will be invited, but it may be an invitation not to glory but to humiliation. God may call others closer in their stead.

PROGNOSIS: “Oh, if I were poor...”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Bottom-Side Up*

This is a parable that Jesus continues to act out. “The one who humbles himself will be raised up,” he tells the company (v.

11). From his birth, through his work with the poor and sick, to his death, Jesus humbled himself and remained far from the head of the table. He kept adding extensions to the table so that more could fit and share in God's feast. He went so far down that finally he was executed beyond the boundaries of the law of his people, cut off from his God. And God, the Host? There is a reason that the early church referred to Jesus' life as God's "economy" or "arrangement." God has accommodated us all at this banquet with foresight and sacrifice. God's whole life has been prioritized for this. Then God raised up Jesus, the one who humbled himself to death. The table turned, so to speak, and the bottom became the top. For those at the bottom, this is good news, even for those thrust to the bottom by God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Seeing the People in Real Life

Weddings re-arrange the relations of a whole community. This wedding, too, puts God in a new relationship with us, and us with each other. Thereby special value gets attached for us to a new set of people. They are valued because they have become kin, not because there is an expectation that they can advance us. In fact, they may inconvenience us or put us on the other side of the law. But, as the writer to the Hebrews put it, "Let mutual love continue. ...Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured" (Hebrews 13:1 and 3). God has done this for us in Jesus. It is the way God's household runs.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Being Humble and Being Raised Up

This has implications for our normal lunches and dinners, as Jesus reminds his earthly host. Our new priorities give a certain new shape to our everyday lives. If we have the luxury of spending money, then it becomes important to re-arrange our

lives so that we see the poor and make sure that it is they who benefit from our expenditures. Who grew this food that we are eating? Who made this item? Who is profiting from our activity? Our eyes are not directed to the best seats in the house, but to the poor and weak who are with us in every aspect of our lives, so that they will not be invisible. The word "generous" gets a new meaning in this context. It no longer refers simply to the warmth of our heart as we give; now it refers to the recipients too. To be generous is to give to those who need it, not to those who don't. Real generosity is no way to get ahead. It is not even a way to get equal compensation. It directs those who are poor also away from the scramble to gain the favor of the rich as if the rich were God, and re-directs them to each other to "conduct their affairs with justice..., secure in the Lord" (Psalm 112:5 and 7). Valuing themselves and one another they may insist on their own existence and visibility, exposing the ugliness of greed for what it is, and calling those who practice it to remember who is Host at this table.