

## *Dining Divas*

First Congregational Church Branford

9-1-19/Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Just as Jesus set free the crippled woman in last Sunday's text, Jesus had been trying to set everyone free from Hebrew rules and laws, like being forbidden to heal on the Sabbath. In today's text, he's trying to free them from their proprieties regarding class and stature. And, so,

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. <sup>7</sup>When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. <sup>8</sup>“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; <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*” <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup>And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

The word of God for the people of God.

(wrap feather boa around neck, with affected voice) Oh hello, my name is Diane Diva, and I'll be dining with you today. I suppose this is the head table. Now, I hear this Jesus is going to be dining with us. Where do you suppose he'll sit? Here. Well, then, of course, I'll sit right next to him. You all must be the commoners, sitting so far away. Thank you, darling, wherever you are, for washing my feet when I arrived. Oh, it's going to be a grand affair, isn't it? I hear Jesus is quite a guest. I'll entertain him with all my stories, and he'll be so pleased

when I give him a large gift of money. **I'll be sure to be on his special list of people...** leave a boa on the floor.)

Well, now!

Anyway, don'tcha know, the Pharisees were keeping a watchful eye on this troublemaking Jesus... and beginning to conspire against him. They decided to invite him to dinner on the Sabbath. He'd already performed healings on the Sabbath. What *more* might he do? They knew his nature would be to do something offensive, something that would make people feel very uncomfortable - which would give them more ammunition, right? Well, Jesus didn't disappoint! He embarrassed everybody there!

He addressed how the guests jockey for the first couches at a meal. Jesus exposed these dinners for what they were - occasions of social importance to which people of one's own class were invited. People noticed where one ate, with whom one ate, whether one washed before eating, and where one sat to eat. A guest list was usually comprised of those closest to the host or hostess--relatives, friends, and rich neighbors--and it tended to foster a cycle of "I've washed your back, now you wash mine." I've fed you scrumptious food with the finest wine, now in turn I expect the same thing back... or for you to do something else for me....

Jesus then boldly instructs the host that true hospitality is never about being repaid; and one ought never extend hospitality in order to curry favor in some way. He says to invite those who have been overlooked--the poor and maimed, the lame and the blind. They've probably never had such a meal, and they'd never be able to return the favor. Well, by now, the host is seeing Jesus' head on a platter! Can you imagine?? Jesus had terrible table manners! But, Jesus would say, theirs were worse.

I know that some of you have hosted those who society forgets, or spurns. It's really great who you've remembered. Gay and lesbian people have been some of my most fun dinner guests! Abe's godmommies were the first lesbian couple I married when I became a pastor in Indianapolis in 1995, of a church with many gay people. **But**, we've never had a homeless person or family, or refugees over for dinner. Which makes me feel a little like a dining diva. I mostly hobknob with people who think like me, with my same socio-economic background.

In thinking about who else gets spurned in America, it continues to be surprising that African-Americans are still spurned by many Americans. The Hartford Courant pointed out that Gallup polls now show a greater percentage of black Americans think new laws are needed to curb discrimination against blacks. But, here's a uniting story from The Christian Century publication: First Grace in

New Orleans is the result of the merger of two congregations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 – one black, the other white. The first Sunday the groups worshiped together, only 60 percent attended – today attendance has quadrupled. The church's outreach ministries include a medical clinic, a halfway house, a feeding program and a legal clinic. You know what that tells me? It seems that when people are caught up in the *mission* of the church, they're not concerned about the color of somebody's skin. When churches aren't caught up in mission, they get caught up in being concerned about race and sexuality, or worry about money, or get caught up in anger at the church, but mission to those in need seems to cut right through all that and unites a people.

What would Jesus say to racism? He'd say, welcome *everyone* to the table and get to know one another. Then, of course you know what he would say... *Seat black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered folks in the highest place!*

Here's another kind of person to invite to dinner and exalt - the single parent, and his or her child or children. I have a single mom friend who's the adoptive mother of two girls from China. An assignment in the second grade last year was to do a family tree. It was the traditional family tree - mother's side and father's side. In international adoption, there's mostly never any information on biological parents. It seems to me that school systems or teachers who know the background

of the children in the class would send home a couple of family tree templates that would validate adoptive and biological parents' family trees; or simply attach a note that shows a sensitivity to that child's family arrangement - so there's not this assumption on what a family looks like. Sometimes a family is two moms, or a mom and a child, or two dads, or a dad and a child. No child should be made to feel that their experience is strange or less than. We've all heard the expression, *Love Makes a Family*. Let's exalt non-traditional families. Give them a place of honor at the table.

When I worked at South Church Middletown, a stranger walked in one day and I assumed they were in need of money. The man looked down on his luck, but it turned out that he was a friend of the church, and he wanted to donate his large tv to the church's tag sale. He had emphysema and was unable to carry it in, so I called a member who said he could come with his hand truck, which gave me a chance to sit with the man for a bit. I invited him to sit in a very cushy leather lounge chair in the social room, while I sat on the arm of a couch. I did have to keep reminding myself to put aside the work I had upstairs, to recognize there was nothing greater than to exalt this angel come to visit me. Work can wait. *This is*

*the work.* When we went out to his jeep to get the chair, he beamed when he showed me his bumper sticker, “Grace Happens.” It sure does. It sure does.

Pastors are often divas disguised as humble servants, and they’re often adored. But, exalting pastors who are there to exalt God isn’t wise – pastors need it the least – they may crave it the most, but they need it the least. Look around here for who needs it the most. I cringe when worship leaders are idolized. You know what drives me crazy?! Ministers who have vanity license plates, something about being a minister! UGH! Worship leaders can start to believe all the hype about themselves – and as our teacher told it today -- all who exalt themselves will be humbled -- and those who humble themselves will be exalted...

It is YOU who are the beloved - you and you and you and you...; my tv man is the beloved. Exalt the woman standing at the end of the street with a whiskey bottle turned up - she is a special friend to Jesus. Exalt those who don’t get to be in the spotlight. Exalt our senior citizens who live in nursing homes. *Exalt the one who can’t do anything for you.*

What a great reminder as we soon begin the church year, of who we should make sure to invite to our table.

Banquet means a welcoming. One of these day we’re ALL gonna sit at the Welcome Table. Amen.