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Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
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**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

*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.*

*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.*

*"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; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

*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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

The gospel story tells about Jesus at a dinner party. Jesus, being an itinerant preacher, went to a lot of homes and to a number of dinners. Significant ministry, healing and teaching happened in the context of meals.

In today's gospel, at first glance it seems we are getting an etiquette lesson. Don't take the best place but take an unimportant place. That saves you the embarrassment of having to give up your place to someone more

important and leaves open the possibility that you could be upgraded to first class.

But in reality, this passage is about much more than just etiquette. The story is really about status, honor, power, patronage and social climbing. The ancient world was built around an elaborate system of patronage and control. Nothing was ever given freely. Everything that was done was done to keep people your debt, to be able to call in favors, to increase one's position. Not that this is just an ancient phenomenon.

I've told you the story about Dan Sapp, the rector of Christ Church in Raleigh, NC. The church was the first Episcopal church in the city, lots of history....just across the street from the capital. One Sunday this person visited the church and was speaking with Dan at the door. He visitor was aware of the status of Christ Church, its history and so forth, and he wanted Dan to know he had status too. So he kept saying things, dropping names, trying to get Dan to acknowledge his status. Dan didn't play the game. Finally the man, frustrated, said, "Well you know, my family goes back a long way." And Dan said, without missing a beat, "By definition, everyone's does."

That was Dan's acerbic way of saying, "When you are invited, you might want to take the lowest place at the table." But we constantly make rules, keep count, strive for status.

One of my prized possessions is a book that I found in my mother's apartment when I was cleaning it out after her death. It was published in 1948 and the title is "Vogue's Book of Etiquette. So, I looked up, "Place of honor" in it. And I found this: "In almost every country –with the notable exception of Scandinavia, where places of honor at table are to the left of the host and hostess –the place of honor is at the right hand...(in some locales) the place of honor extends far beyond the usual confines of the dining-room table...(and so for instance) A man walking with his wife, or sitting in a restaurant with a 'respectable' woman at his right hand, would

never salute a friend unless the woman with him were also at *his* right hand, on the assumption that any woman placed at a man's left could not be respectable, and could not be introduced to a respectable woman."

(Vogues' Book of Etiquette by Millicent Fenwick, 1948) So you can see the attention to status, to power, to privilege.

We don't do it that way now, but we do still keep score. I remember the transition I made from grammar school into Junior High and High School, and part of what made that so difficult was finding a place. There was a popular crowd and then there was the rest of us. These kinds of divisions still go on and are defined by various things. Adults play the same kind of games....who is in and who is out.

Much of what Jesus said and did was intended to overthrow the culture of status, honor and power. When watching people putting money in the temple treasury, Jesus praised not the people who put in the most coins, the largest amount of money, he praised the widow who put in one penny. Jesus said we should give, but do it in secret and not to gain status. And in today's gospel, he tells us to invite folks who can't possibly return the favor. Our dinner parties are not designed to curry favor, but to share grace and hospitality. Point by point Jesus was attacking the way society was organized and pointing toward a new way.

And what is that new way? It is where everyone has the same status...where everyone is a child of God, pure and simple. What defines our status in the church is not any human standard. Our status was granted by God in the waters of baptism and there we were made children of God, citizens of the kingdom and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

Christian communities are meant to reflect this radical welcome and hospitality. But let's be careful, it is possible to misread and misapply this passage. If you are struggling with low self-esteem, and you always look for the lowest place because you think that is

all you deserved, this passage is not saying, "Great. You should feel worthless." Nor is this passage encouraging you to compete with others for the lowest place with the goal to win the prize "Humblest of All". I can see that plaque now!

The type of Christian community Jesus envisions and illustrates by talking about dinner parties inviting the outcasts, is not a work we do as much as it is a life we embrace...A life of grace which naturally leads to openness.

That is why in our mission at Grace and Holy Trinity Church, we talk not just about individual discipleship, not just about serving the world, but we also say, we strive to be a strong Christian community...and a strong community is one that is driven not by status and power, but by God's undeserved and all encompassing love. On a practical level that means we speak with everyone within a six pew radius at the end of services, it means we talk not just to our friends at coffee hour, but we meet new people, and we look for people who might be on the fringe, with no one talking to them... it means we leave a chair or two at the table vacant, so there is always room for more. And it is fun being open like that isn't it? There is grace in it.

Indeed, there is such grace and good news in the gospel for today for each one of us. We do well to identify with the outcasts, with those in the story who are considered beyond the pale. And yet, God has invited us to the table. There is no way we can return the favor. We cannot curry status with God or put God in our debt. But it doesn't matter, we are invited. God does love us. Our sins are forgiven. Come to the table...and tell everyone else, there is a place set for them too. Amen.