

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – 28 August 2022

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Meals are important in social ceremonies. Some scholars say, in Luke, *“Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal or coming from a meal.”* There are quite a lot of incidences and parables explained during the meal. The structure of today’s gospel reading is divided into two sections. The first section is addressed to the guests (v.7) and the second to the host (v.12).

I believe many of us go for a dinner party or a banquet. If someone invited us for a banquet, we all get ready and wear the best dress or suit and go for it. Because it is an honour to attend the banquet as a guest. We dress well to get the attention of the host. We also explain to people how close we are to the host. As normal human beings, we seize prominence to gain honour.

Honour and shame were important in the first-century Mediterranean world. The honour was expressed in various ways. It is measured based on wealth, not just wealth but its consumption and display, for example, banquets, fine cloths, weapons, houses, etc. Luke’s gospel gives a lot of examples of how the world in Jesus’ time responded to honour.

When we are invited to somebody's house for dinner, we do not very often do controversial things during the meal, and we do not very often say controversial things either. Is that because we want to be nice people, inoffensive, and liked by

everybody? We do not get the impression from today's Bible reading that Jesus was happy to simply be liked, because his actions, his parables, his stories, and his conversation were challenging and placed everyone in discomfort. Put simply, Jesus got up the noses of religious people and well-to-do people in general.

We live in a world where we hear constantly about our "*comfort zone*." A person's comfort zone refers to those situations in which the person feels comfortable, safe, and free from threat or even challenge.

Today's gospel passage divides into two parts.

In the first part, Jesus cautions against sitting in the place of honour at a wedding banquet and advises taking the lowest place instead.

Jesus looked around and noticed how the dinner guests were picking out places of special honour at the dinner table. Proximity to the host of the dinner made you a special guest but this is all being done for show. Do we do things for a show?

Choosing the seat of honour for ourselves sounds to me like craving our comfort zone. The best seat is where we want to be because we think it will be good for us to be comfortable, safe, and free from threat or even challenge. Jesus cautions us against moving into a comfort zone all on our own as though we know what we are doing, as though it is something we need to do.

The one who issues the invitation has the final say about the ranking of guests. As we accept Christ's invitation to join him at the Table in the Kingdom of God, we must admit that we are only there by grace. We do not deserve such grace, and we are not any better than anyone else because of it.

In other words, do not make it your business to move into a comfort zone, or if you find yourself in one, to stay there. Life is bigger than that.

In the second part, he urges us to invite the crippled, lame, and blind when we give a luncheon or dinner, rather than friends, relatives, and rich people.

Rather than limiting our guest list to people who are clones of ourselves, people with whom we are comfortable, who do not threaten or even challenge us, invite instead those who are different, people who make us uncomfortable, who are rejected based on their colour, race, and sexual orientation.

The point is these helpless people have nothing to give us in return. In Jesus' time, humility is considered unworthy. So, Jesus introduced new world order. He reversed the world order. Who are the crippled, the lame and the blind in my circle?

Jesus not only tells us this, but he also demonstrates it. His entire life, his public ministry, he was with rejected, marginalized, and excommunicated by the

community. His life was full of one episode after another of not remaining in a comfort zone, and not trying to enter one. Repeatedly he takes the low seat and invites rejected to be his guests. His company with sinners and tax collectors, and his meal with Zacchaeus are a few examples.

The safe place, the preferred seating, and the predictable crowd are not enough. The reason it is not enough is a theological one: the true God, the wild God, the God who is alive will not linger there long. This God keeps appearing in the low places, among the unlikely, and there enjoys the time of his life.

Today's readings challenge us to look beyond ourselves and to be open to the holiness of others. Jesus' words regarding banquet guests are also applicable to our time. Jesus calls us to mindfulness and humility. Humility is not to be used as a strategy for recognition.

We are part of a larger whole in which others matter just as much as we do, in God's eyes. Those who are confident in God's grace can advocate for their positions and affirm their value and place in the church and society without diminishing others.

If we trust that our lives are in God's hands, we do not need to be "first" "right" or "orthodox." These are all ego-based behaviours that require someone else to

be “second,” “wrong,” or “heretical.” Is that Jesus’ company with the rejected, and excluded make us uncomfortable?

We need a ‘better seat’ at the table. We do not want to mix with rejected ones who are different from us, and who have a different sexual orientation. We think that we need to save Church, God, and Bible from the liberals. Jesus is calling us to come out of our comfort zone.

As Jeremiah said, we dug our wells and forsaken the living water. To dig our own wells, thinking we can be self-sufficient and independent. We call ourselves ‘*chosen*’ to discriminate and expel others from the community. We have our own idols and ideologies to excommunicate people to avoid inclusiveness.

Are we using our narrow biblical and theological understanding to domesticate God to avoid discomfort? Are we acting as if we are God?

Let us take a few moments to reflect on whether someone else’s presence makes us discomfort.

AMEN