

Come, Lord Jesus, Be Our Guest

Luke 14:1, 7-14; August 28, 2022; Area-led worship; composed July 2, 2022

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,” was the table grace used before most meals at my house growing up. The prayer usually brings an image of an empty chair at our table for the Lord, who would be present but passive during the meal. What are we really asking for when we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest”?

If we were in the Gospel of John—we’re not, we’re in Luke this summer—we’d be expecting a party. Think of Jesus’ very first act of ministry in the Gospel of John: he goes to a wedding and when the hosts run out of wine, he makes more. Lots more. And it’s really good wine. Lots and lots of really good wine at a wedding banquet. It’s a sign of what life is like with Jesus: a sign of abundance, extravagance, even. With Jesus, there is abundant life now. In John, Jesus is the life of the party.

But this isn’t the Gospel of John. In Luke, well, in Luke, Jesus sure gets a lot of dinner invitations. He gets invitations to have dinner with everyone from tax collectors to respectable, hardworking women, to Pharisees. This is the third time in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus is invited to a Pharisee’s house to have dinner. You’d think that this was because he’s a pretty awesome guest—the dinner parties he attended certainly seem to have been the talk of the town—but when he dines Pharisees, Jesus seems to be more of a mood-killer than the life of the party.

Here, in chapter 14, dinner hasn’t even started yet and Jesus starts quoting old proverbs about humility to the other guests: “when you are invited...do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.... But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowliest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’.... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (vv. 8-11). Hardly an original thought, but clearly directed at some of the other guests. Then Jesus turns to the host and begins to criticize who has been invited to the dinner: “Do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbours.... But...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

What happened to polite dinner conversation?

But Jesus' comments here are relatively mild compared to the last time he was invited to dine with a Pharisee. In chapter 11, Jesus' dining companion is shocked by Jesus' manners. He doesn't wash his hands before the meal! Can you imagine? Now, hand washing before a meal had a different meaning in first century Palestine than it does in the 2020s. It served more of a ritual purpose than it does now, but rituals have practical purposes. So eww, gross. Wash your hands before you eat, bud!

When pressed on the matter of washing his hands before the meal, Jesus goes on to draw a distinction between outward and inward cleanliness and accuses Pharisees of being unclean on the inside. He lambasts Pharisees and legal experts for being hypocrites. It's so bad that when Jesus finally leaves, it says that "the scribes and Pharisees began to be very hostile to him and to cross-examine him about many things" (11:54). They are trying to trap him with their questions.

There is no reason to think that Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees has improved since that challenging meal in chapter 11, so the invitation to dinner by a leader of the Pharisees in today's reading is not a friendly invitation. As the opening verse says "they [the Pharisees and other guests] were watching him closely" (14:1) to find something wrong with his behaviour and he knows it.

Sure enough, even before they are seated for dinner, in verses excluded from the reading, there is a conflict. There just so happens to be someone in need of healing, and it just happens to be the Sabbath. This has happened before, twice already in the Gospel of Luke. Everyone knows what will happen: Jesus will immediately heal the person even though it is the Sabbath, regardless of the urgency of the ailment, daring whatever religious folks are around to accuse him of breaking the Sabbath by showing mercy to a child of God. This time the Pharisees don't have to say anything. Jesus asks about the legality of healing on the Sabbath and answers himself through his action and words. Even before the guests go inside to be seated, the tension is rising.

Inside, Jesus is watching the others as much as they are watching him, and at the first opportunity he begins to make his point: he's been invited to make the Pharisees and other guests feel good about themselves: to exalt themselves by humbling this rival preacher and trapping him in his own words, and it's not going to work. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." To the host who is trying to exalt himself and his

friends by issuing an invitation to this itinerant preacher, Jesus suggests that he would be better off inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

The meal continues after today's reading ends, and Jesus keeps talking. He goes on to describe what it will be like when he is the host:

When Jesus Christ hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, everyone is invited, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, everyone is invited, but not everyone will respond to the invitation, some people—those who expect to be invited—will dismiss the invitation.

When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, everyone is invited, but not everyone will believe that they are really welcome, especially outsiders, the people who are not usually invited: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and people of ill repute, tax collectors and sinners. They will need to be assured that the invitation really is for them.

When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, everyone is invited, and there will be healing and forgiveness. There will be salvation.

This messianic banquet is not in some distant future: Jesus is already hosting the messianic banquet, here, where the kingdom of God is taking root.

Even as Jesus is invited as a guest to a Pharisee's home for dinner, he is hosting the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God. He hosts a man ill and in need of healing on the Sabbath, and others who come to him for healing. When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, there is healing.

Even as Jesus is invited as a guest to another Pharisee's home for dinner, a Pharisee named Simon, Jesus hosts a woman, one known to be a sinner. This woman, who is not named, anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair (7:36-50). Jesus explains to Simon that the woman knows that she is in need of forgiveness and has come to Jesus and showed him great love because she believes that he can forgive her sins, whereas Simon the Pharisee does not recognize the value of what Jesus offers. The unnamed woman gratefully accepts the invitation to the banquet Jesus hosts and experiences forgiveness, while Simon

does not recognize that the kingdom of God has come to his house. *When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, there is forgiveness.*

Even as Jesus is invited as a guest to Martha's house, and Martha dutifully serves Jesus, her sister Mary recognizes that the kingdom of God has come to their house and she need not be confined to traditional gender roles. She can sit at the Lord's feet and fully experience the kingdom of God. When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, there is a reordering of society.

Even as Jesus is criticized by Pharisees for going to the homes of tax collectors to eat, the tax collectors—more than one, there is Levi and much later Zacchaeus—respond to the invitation to dine with Jesus in his kingdom, and follow him. Salvation has come to their house that very day. When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, there is salvation.

Even as heartbroken disciples invited a stranger to dine with them on the third day after Jesus' death, they realize that they are being hosted by the risen Christ in his kingdom. Salvation is there, too. When Jesus hosts the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God, there is resurrection and new life.

Even as we invite Jesus with the words, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest," maybe out of habit, or expecting a passive benevolent presence at our meal, Jesus is our host and the kingdom of God is in our homes, whether we recognize it or not. Whether we recognize the value of the invitation to be Christ's guests, whether we believe that the invitation really is for us, we are invited to dine with Jesus Christ at his banquet of all the saints in the kingdom of God, where there is healing, and forgiveness, and salvation. We are invited to dine in the kingdom of God, where the social order is turned upside down, where the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are given places of honour, where all who exalt themselves are humbled and those who humble themselves are exalted.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Amen.