

Here's Johnny
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Luke 14:1, 7-14 NRSV

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 and sisters 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."

Growing up, dinner time was an important part of my family's life. We ate dinner together every evening. Full stop. Even with sports practice, youth group, or my dad's work schedule that often ran late into the evening. We would wait until everyone was home and sit at the dining room table to eat together.

Once we were sitting around the table, there were clear expectations:

- Your napkin had to go into your lap.
- You had to wait to eat until everyone was seated and a prayer had been said before you could eat.
- You must take proper sized bites.
- Forks, knives, and spoons had to be properly used (using your fingers was never acceptable).
- If you don't like something you leave it on your plate and don't make a big deal about it.

- You had to have at least one small glass of milk with dinner (this was the rule that I hated the most).

I would often roll my eyes and complain about the formalities of our dinners. Especially because I didn't have the same experience when I ate dinner at my friend's house. Without fail, as soon as I started to complain my dad remarked with the same line: *we practice table manners now, so when you find yourself in a situation where you are dining with important people or in an important situation, you will know what to do; you won't have to think about what you should do, because you have already practiced it your whole life.*

We often hear stories of Jesus sharing meals with outcasts and unexpected people, but he also had meals with people across the wide spectrum of the community social hierarchy. And in our story today he is with a group of elite men. Like my dad's teaching at the dinner table, these men knew there were rules and expectations when you were a guest at a meal with important people—especially a Sabbath meal.

Jesus is at the house of a “chief Pharisee”. What is a chief Pharisee? He likely oversaw a group of peers and may have been part of the Sanhedrin, their version of the Supreme Court, which made decisions about both religious and political issues. And along with Jesus, this chief Pharisee invited other people of importance.

They all gathered for the Sabbath meal. This meal was meant to be opulent, lingered over. The term “Sabbath luxury” was coined to describe the large-scale feasts, dancing, and singing that took place in the homes of wealthy Jewish people.

This was an important gathering. If it happened today, it would have shown up on social media or in the society pages of the paper. Everyone attending knew the expectations.

For one, gatherings of this nature came with the expectation that an invite today would be followed in the future with a reciprocal invitation. The host for this meal would go all out to impress his guests. It was then expected that the guests in the future would invite the host to a comparable meal with all the opulence that was shown to them.

Additionally, there was a hierarchy within the guests, and the most important guest would be given the seat of honor. As the impressive guest list arrived, each assumed they would be that honored guest. Jesus watched this social custom become a point of contention as each person vied for the most important seat.

Now Jesus was already on the radar of the religious elite, and many were suspicious of him. At this point in the gospel of Luke, Jesus had already been called out four times for doing unlawful acts on the Sabbath. Including our story last week where he freed the hunched back woman from her debilitating condition. Even knowing this, Jesus stills call out the guests by telling them a parable.

“Imagine you are at a wedding banquet,” he says. Of course, most of the men at the table would assume they belonged at the seat of honor. But Jesus reminds them how humiliating it would be to claim the honored seat, only to be told it belonged to someone else. Then, the only places left would be the lowest seats.

It would be like assuming you could sit in the reserved VIP seats at a wedding, only to be told that those seats aren’t for you. So instead, you have to go to the very back of the crowd, in the cheap seats, because that is all that is left.

Instead, Jesus suggests it would be wiser to assume you are *not* the most important person. Sit in a lower place, and how much better it would be for the host to invite you up higher. While this sounds like common sense to us, it would have been an absurd suggestion to these men. Who could possibly be more important than them? The very idea was insulting.

Then Jesus takes it further. He then turns to the host and chides him on his guest list. This man, the elite of elites throws a party and only invites people who he knows are wealthy and resourced just like him. He is flexing, showing off his wealth, knowing that in return each person will want to prove that they are just as wealthy, resourced, and elite as he is. So, they will all invite him to their future parties. It was a game of social climbing, a back-and-forth display of opulence.

Instead, Jesus suggests that that they should invite the people who they know will not be able to repay them. Invite the poor. Invite the crippled. Invite the lame. Invite the blind. Invite the single mom working two jobs who is struggling to pay her bills. Invite the recently widowed neighbor who doesn’t have anyone to share a meal with for the first time in his life. Invite the refugee and asylum seeker who is scared they will be sent back to a country where they fear for their life. Invite the chronically unhoused person. Invite the youth who you mentor. Invite the new family who moved in next door. Invite the work colleague. Invite the new face setting next to you in the pews.

The room must have gone silent. Jesus had just reprimanded the guests and insulted the host. Forks and knives scraped plates as people avoided eye contact.

Yes, Jesus is talking about meals and etiquette, but he uses it as a way to talk about the Kingdom of God. Jesus is constantly flipping the norms upside down. And even though he is surrounded by the literal people who determine the “norms”, he still challenges their thinking and proposes a better way.

The ideas Jesus has are big and drastic and different from the way things are done. They can often feel daunting. At any given moment there is more we could be doing. It is easy to get overwhelmed. It is easy to become dogmatic, always searching for ways to be better. It is easy to get discouraged that you are never doing enough. Especially in our current landscape. Research shows that we, as a country, are more divided than ever. We are

surrounded by people who look and think and act like us. We are in echo chambers where we are reflected images and stories that reaffirm the thoughts and ideas we already have. Like the guests at the meal with Jesus, they surrounded themselves with people who were just like them; wealthy, influential, a narrow representation of society. The idea of throwing all that out can feel extreme and anxiety inducing.

But here is the good news: we don't have to have it all figured out at once. We don't have to master it overnight. We don't need to throw out our guest lists and replace it with a list of the most extreme people. We can start small. Add one unexpected person. We can learn the name of our mail carrier and greet them as they come by each day. We can introduce ourselves to the couple who moved in down the street and suggest a few of our favorite local places for them to check out. We could drop a note in the mail that simply says, "thinking of you".

Living into the Kingdom of God is a muscle that we exercise. We don't have to do it all at once, but we continue to strive to strengthen that muscle in little ways that more reflect the Kingdom of God. Just like each night I sat down to dinner with my family and practiced for the time that I would need to know the proper dinner etiquette. So too do we continue to live out our best attempt at reflecting the Kingdom of God, so when opportunities present themselves, we are more than ready to meet it.

In 1991 a spunky nine-year-old boy filled with energy came into a church with his grandparents in tow. The grandparents were friendly but formal, they had a hesitation about them. They were faithful church goers who found themselves without a church to go to. Recently, their grandson's parents had died, which left them as his care givers. Their grandson Johnny was a special boy, but some people had a hard time seeing how special he was. Johnny's parents died from an addiction to drugs. And due to their intravenous drug use, Johnny was born with AIDS.

The 80's and 90's were a scary time as the world grappled with AIDS. Little was known about it, and out of fear people tried to isolate those affected by this deadly disease. As Johnny's grandparents became his guardians, they found that they were not welcome into the spaces they previously were a part of, one of those places was their church. That is how Johnny and his grandparents found their way to the doors of a new church that morning.

The three of them found a place of radical welcome and refuge. The building was a place filled with love. Johnny attended Sunday school with the kids, he ran from the parking lot up the sidewalk like all the other kids did. On Christmas day Johnny lost his battle with AIDS and the church mourned his death.

Slowly his grandparents reintegrated into their previous lives, but they left a big impression on a little church. The radical hospitality extended to Johnny and his grandparents is a hallmark of this congregation. The church had strengthened their "Kingdom of God muscle" so when Johnny and his grandparents showed up, they were ready.

I was 8 years old when Johnny showed up to my church. I attended Sunday school with him. I ran the sidewalks from the parking lot up to the church with him. And I remember my parents telling me that Johnny needed an extra bit of love. It wasn't till many years later that I realized how unique my church's radical welcoming, radical love, and radical hospitality was and is still.

The church didn't seek out Johnny and his grandparents, they just showed up and the church was ready because they had been practicing being part of the Kingdom of God. So too does Jesus encourage us—like he encouraged the men at the Sabbath table—to be part of the Kingdom of God.

Here is the invitation: start small. We may not be able to change everything all at once, but we can take one step. One act of love. One gesture of welcome. One open chair at the table. Every small action is a step in living more fully into the Kingdom of God. Every time we choose compassion over convenience, hospitality over hesitation, we reflect more of God's reign here on earth.

And here's the truth: when our tables and communities are filled with a wider spectrum of people—different ages, backgrounds, life stories, and experiences—we are stronger. We see God's Kingdom more clearly because no single one of us carries the full image of God alone. We need each other. The body of Christ is more complete and more beautiful when all are represented and included.

And when the moment comes, when someone walks through our doors in need of love, welcome, and belonging, we will be ready. Because we will have already been practicing being the Kingdom of God at our tables, in our neighborhoods, and in our lives. Because when we welcome in the Johnny's of the world, we are welcoming in Christ. We are part of the Kingdom of God.