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~ *Luke 14:1, 7-14* ~

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National Bishop-elect

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.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 8 “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, 9 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. 10 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. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 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. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

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Welcome to this summer sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations. It is great to be with you this Sunday. I am Larry Kochendorfer. My preferred pronouns are he/him. I currently serve as the ½ Interim Pastor at Our

Redeemer Lutheran in Penticton, British Columbia, and ½ Assistant to the Bishop for Special Service in the BC Synod. Soon, tomorrow, September 1, I begin a new calling as your National Bishop. Thank you for your prayers for Cathy and me, and our family, for our National Staff and Council, and for Bishop Susan in this season of transition.

Tomorrow is also the beginning of the annual Season of Creation ecumenical initiative observed September 1 to October 4. This year's theme is "Peace with Creation" and there are many helpful resources on the Lutheran World Federation website. I encourage you to use them.

Canadian Lutheran World Relief has provided wonderful resources, too, for a 4-week "Friends of Creation" challenge helping to restore the ecosystem around Lake Chad. I encourage you to use CLWR's incredible resources available on the CLWR website.

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, I honour and acknowledge that I live and work and pray on traditional and ancestral territory of the many First Nations, Metis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries. I am speaking to you today from the unceded lands of the Syilx/Okanagan people, in Penticton, BC. I invite you to hold a moment of reflection for the ground under your feet where you are today, giving thanks for the peoples who have come before us and in a spirit of care for this land on behalf of future generations.

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It's the Sabbath day and Jesus is at the home of a Pharisee, a leader of the Pharisees' – for a meal.

This isn't a nice August, 'sit in the backyard on a lawn chair in the bright Holy Land sun with an iced tea in hand' kind of party. No, I imagine it as a 'mind your manners, sit-down dinner for a hundred at the leader of the Pharisees' air-conditioned estate' kind of party.

And it's quite a party.

In my mind's eye – I know I might be stretching it a bit but come along with me anyway – I see a mammoth dining room. There's a brilliantly lit chandelier in the center of the room and a table the length of a bowling alley loaded with the finest china and crystal, and candles and floral arrangements, and food piled high on silver platters and in magnificent serving bowls, and the best wines chilled to perfection next to the specially ordered fancy waters, and so many sparkling forks and knives and spoons that we almost need sun glasses to shield our eyes.

And the guests are the crème de la crème in town. The politically powerful, the religiously powerful, the culturally powerful. The CEOs of the Royal Jerusalem Bank and the JSE – the Jerusalem Stock Exchange. Lawyers and business tycoons and city council members. And the leaders of the Pharisees and those who contributed substantially to the temple

coffers. And the day's rock stars and the art critics and the movie giants and a carefully screened group of media journalists.

And Jesus, right in the middle of them.

Listen in on the conversation. There is polite chit-chat about the weather at the Mediterranean coast during the recent holiday season, and the latest international box office success, and about how Jerusalem just isn't the same since Pontius Pilate came to town.

And there's Jesus, right in the middle of them, and "...they were watching him closely."

Unfortunately, those who set the reading for this morning jumped over several verses which are important to this reading: "...they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had edema. And Jesus asked the experts in the law and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?' But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him and sent him away. Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?' And they could not reply to this."

Suddenly, in this mammoth dining room, as if appearing from nowhere, there is a man who is ill and Jesus asks the *crème de la crème*, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?" Yes, or no? And all conversation stopped. The polite, social niceties came to an end. "They were silent."

Jesus pushes back the crab-filled mushroom caps, he moves the arrangement of pastel orchids to the side, careful not to tip the silver platter of creamed cauliflower – and he heals the man.

Well, there are gasps around the table. Guest looks at guest. The hostess says something like, "Well, I've never," clutches her brooch and falls into her chair. The host is completely dumbfounded. They've never seen anything like it. How dare he!

"If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" They were silent.

Jesus' healing on the Sabbath isn't just about a violation of a religious rule, it is a violation of civility, a social outrage, a breaking of the social fabric. And what may alarm them most is the presence among them of someone who is apparently so free from the religious and social restrictions – the unbending borders and rigid boundaries – that he doesn't give a hoot about public opinions, or Miss Manners – or even death itself.

And Jesus confirms this. Standing in front of the seafood linguine and the fresh croissants and the melt-in-your mouth Beef Wellington, he turns to the host and guests, "You call this a party? This man was in pain."

You see, just as they were watching Jesus closely, Jesus has been doing some watching of his own. And he casts a vision of an alternative world through a stark, challenging parable. Those at the dinner party hear it. And we hear this alternative vision too, two millennia later.

“When you are invited by someone to a party, don’t sit at the best place, because somebody with a better pedigree may have been invited. You’ll be embarrassed when asked to move down a couple of chairs. Sit down at the lowest place, and the host may come to you saying, “Friend, I’ve got a chair up next to me, come and join me.”

The dinner crowd mulls it over. Of course, it is hard to trust Jesus with important issues like dinner hierarchy because he is known to have terrible taste in dinner companions. He always sits at the tacky end of the table with those who do not have place cards and are not even on the seating charts. He sits with the low and the left-out and – what is worse – he seems to have a ball.

And Jesus isn’t finished yet. Sure enough, while they are chatting about his suggestion of a new, potentially dramatic and useful approach to dining entrances – an alternate vision – “After you”; “No, after you”; “No, really...,” Jesus calls out to the host, “And the next time you have people to dinner, don’t ask those who can pay you back. Don’t ask anybody who can do you any favors. Ask the poor who won’t know how much money you spent on the hors d’oeuvres, only that they are delicious. Ask the crippled and the lame who won’t be dancing around worrying about which chair to choose but will be grateful to sit down. Ask the blind, who won’t be watching over your shoulder to see who else is coming. Ask the powerless. Ask the empty. You won’t believe the party you will have.”

The sophisticated crowd, the ones in the black ties and shimmering gowns using the right forks and saying, “Oh, no more for me...I don’t care for any,” are appalled. The elegant ones who know their place and know the rules – people – perhaps like us are appalled. People like us who’ve bought into the game too – people who feed on the notion that life is about winning, and being at the head of the class, the top of the heap, with the best seat at the dining room table. People who live their whole lives not only by the book but, by keeping the books, keeping account, keeping score.

Together with the dinner guests we look way down the table at Jesus in the center of a ragtag party of hungry people feasting, enjoying every morsel, singing, telling stories, crying, and laughing until the tears stream down their faces.

The dinner guests and we who know just what to do and where to be and how not to make fools of ourselves, watch, and wonder. What in heaven’s name is going on at the other end of the table?

Communion is going on. The deaf are buttering the biscuits for the blind. The leper shifts to get more strawberry shortcake for the lame. The poor toast the broken-hearted with fine, full-bodied wine. And the host becomes guest.

The evening grows late. Etiquette lessons are over. Time to move on. Jesus stands up, and the one-eyed, crooked-legged, gap-toothed crowd stands with him. They are having a ball, the time of their lives, and they will follow him on and on because everywhere Jesus is – everywhere Jesus is – there is a party – a feast of bread and wine. And there is room for everyone at the table, nobody cares who sits where, and everybody shares in the abundance.

This, dear church – sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ – this alternate vision, is gospel for us today. Good news for the world, and for all creation.

Follow him, dear church. Follow him, to the table and beyond, to the party and the feast, where there is room for all and where all are invited. Follow in mission and action.

Follow him, dear church, knowing that Jesus – love – is at our side.