

8/3/25**The Guest No One Invited*****Luke 14:7-14*****Pastor Nathanael Ryan, Brewster Baptist Church**

Good morning. When I was doing my undergraduate studies at Gordon College, I had the pleasure of taking part in a study abroad program in central Germany during the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I only made it through the first week of the program, which is a story for another day, but while I was there, I had a profound experience that I'll never forget. As our group was walking through the downtown streets of Giessen, a city roughly the size of Lynn, Massachusetts, a homeless man sat outside the crowded restaurant where we had a reservation for lunch.

It had been a long morning, with well over 10,000 steps of walking. We'd just seen some beautiful medieval architecture and gothic cathedrals, and now we were finally going to be able to take a break, have a seat, and enjoy a nice meal together. But as each of us filed one by one into the restaurant and passed by this homeless man without an acknowledgement or a word, I was struck by the lack of humanity and empathy we all showed. We all knew he was there, and we all knew why he had chosen to sit outside this crowded restaurant, but nobody did anything, least of all, me. I sat in that restaurant, unable to eat. My appetite was gone. I felt this urge inside of me to do something, to order a burger to go and bring it to him outside, or even invite him in to join us at the table. But I let the social expectations I've been trained to follow in the world guide my actions, or rather, my inaction. I didn't want to cause a scene; I didn't want to do something that could warrant unwanted looks or raise suspicion. So, I did nothing. I did nothing.

I went the whole rest of that day playing that scene over in my mind. What should I have done? I spent a lot of money to go on that trip, and I had been waiting anxiously for months for the opportunity to see some of the sights we visited that day. But I remember none of them. I wasn't able to enjoy them because I realized I'd missed the most important moment God had in store for me that day: the opportunity to show compassion and recognize the image of God in another that the world had chosen to ignore. That man outside the restaurant was not a part of our trip's itinerary; he wasn't on the tour's brochure. But, in hindsight, it wasn't the beautiful cathedrals or the impeccable stained-glass windows that proved to be the most sacred encounter I'd

experience that day; it was the man I saw who was looking for a meal that I didn't provide, who I never invited in.

As we continue our series "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner", this morning, we learn of another instance where invitations to a meal were clearly given, but one person was noticeably left out. It was a missed opportunity. Lee read for us earlier about how one day, on the Sabbath, Jesus was invited, yet again, by a Pharisee to dine with him in his home. It's a wonder they kept trying. But along the way, presumably just outside, or within sight of the Pharisee's house, a man with dropsy — abnormal swelling in the body — appears to Jesus. Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" (*Luke 14:3 NRSV*). But they remain silent. So Jesus heals the man, and says to the Pharisees, "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?" (*Luke 14:5 NRSV*) — He was effectively saying to them, "You would not hesitate for a moment, if someone you loved was in trouble, to break the law to save *them*, so why is it when someone you *don't* know is suffering, all of a sudden you become sticklers for the law? Why is it that showing compassion all of sudden becomes controversial when the person in need doesn't look like you, or live like you, or sit at your table?"

This is the conversation they're having as Jesus is walking into dinner. It quickly turns into a much larger teaching about the proper rules of hospitality, and the humble nature of the kingdom of God. The continuation of this story from the Gospel of Luke chapter 14, starting at verse 7:

When he [Jesus] 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 your 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.” (*Luke 14:7-14 NRSV*)

As Jesus first enters the room and watches as all these guests start scrambling, vainly, for the most honored seats at the table, he can’t help but become frustrated. It’s clear that the problem he noticed outside the house is present inside the house, too. The same spirit of pride that kept the man with dropsy at a distance from the Pharisees is now present, once again, in the way the Pharisees treat one another. In the ancient world, it was customary for a dinner host to assign each guest a particular seat at the table, according to one’s wealth or social status. So, the richest and most “noble” guests would sit closest to the host, while those with the least honor would sit farthest away. As Jesus enters the home, what He sees are the guests jockeying for those seats of honor, competing to be seen, admired, and appear more important than all the others — even the person next to them. And it’s in response to this scramble that Jesus tells a parable, not just to critique their behavior, but to expose a deeper truth about the upside-down values of the kingdom of God.

He tells of a wedding banquet, where the wisest choice isn’t to grab the *best* seat, but to take the *lowest* one, because in the kingdom of God, true honor isn’t given to those who seek after it, but it is given to the one who’s willing to give it up for the sake of someone else. He says, “When you are invited, go and sit at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say ‘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” (*Luke 14:10-11 NRSV*). Jesus isn’t just teaching about manners or social customs here. He’s challenging the pride and selfishness that too often controls how we relate to others. He’s calling the dinner guests, and He’s calling us, to stop chasing after worldly status, and instead, store up treasures for ourselves in Heaven by making room for those the world often overlooks. By showing humility and taking the lowest place of honor, we have the ability

to raise others up who, perhaps, cannot advocate for themselves. This is what the Pharisees refused to do with the man with dropsy, and it's what so many of us continue to refuse to do today — choosing comfort and reputation over compassion, choosing silence over action, choosing exclusion over hospitality and generosity, choosing to do exactly what I did sitting in that restaurant in Germany.

Jesus' teaching here is about showing radical humility, forsaking the honor and praise we seek from others, and making space, instead, for the poor, the overlooked, the outcast — those who can offer nothing to us in return. This is the way of God's kingdom, where the first will be made last, and the last first, and where "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (*James 4:6 NIV*).

But to make His teaching abundantly clear, Jesus doesn't just address the guests, but the host, too. He calls out the very guy who invited Him to dinner in the first place. The nerve... He says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your 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" (*Luke 14:13-14 NRSV*).

Humility isn't just shown in how we take a seat at the table, brothers and sisters, but in who we invite to the table in the first place. Jesus has the audacity and nerve to call out the very gesture of throwing dinner parties or social gatherings altogether, if their purpose isn't ultimately to reflect the generous heart of God, who welcomes the forgotten, includes the outsider, and creates space for those who the world has left behind. If the purpose of our social functions is the vain pursuit of status, or the comfort of only being around familiar company to the exclusion of others, then what good is that? Exactly who does that benefit, other than yourself? Jesus is trying to get to the heart of our intentions and motivations. Is our hospitality just a strategy to climb a social ladder, or is it a reflection of the generous, self-giving love of God, who asks for nothing in return?

"In our relationships with one another" — and especially the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, those who can't help themselves — are we "having the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather He made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant”? (*Philippians 2:5-7 NIV*). Are we willing to be *servants* at the table of grace? Are we willing to be *hosts* at the wedding banquet of mercy? Or, are we only interested in serving our own kind, curating our guest lists to protect our own comforts, preserve our own image, and ensure that the favor we give is eventually returned? When we host a dinner, who do we invite? Do we invite our friends, our relatives, our rich neighbors, the honored? Or, do we also invite the guest no one invited, the man with dropsy, or the homeless man sitting outside a crowded restaurant in our lives? Who is that for you?

I encourage you, as we prepare our hearts to receive the sacred meal Christ’s invited *us* to, to consider who you’ve left off *your* guest list. Who has God placed in your life who’s still waiting for a seat at your table, longing to be healed?

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

I invite you to join me in reciting this unison prayer of confession, as we yearn for the Lord’s pardon, remembered in His body and blood: We are always uncomfortable, O God who watches, when you notice how we want to sit in the seats of honor. We can be so proper, so good, so well-off that it is easy to imagine that we are superior to the poor. We are so busy completing our “To Do” list each day that we forget to do good when we have the chance. Forgive us, Welcoming God. Fill our emptiness with your grace and humility, that we would spend our lives alongside Jesus, our Lord and Savior, throwing a party for the poor, the damaged, the prisoner, the lost, and the oppressed. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, grant us a spirit of both humility and hospitality, to be gracious servants and hosts of Your kingdom. May we cherish the opportunity to invite others to the table of Your love and grace, that they may be healed of their afflictions, comforted in their sorrow, given peace in their grief, and strengthened in their weakness, by the power of Your Spirit within them. May we cease striving after worldly praise and honor, and find solace with the lowly, for that is where You are. May we welcome the guests who go uninvited, who the world casts aside. May we see them as beloved children, who You died for and bear Your image, who You’ve vowed to never leave behind. May we be

the vessel of Your grace that helps them to know they belong, they're welcomed, and they're loved. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What was your reaction to the story Pastor Nate shared about when he was in Germany? Have you ever had a similar experience of feeling like you missed an opportunity to show compassion? If so, what held you back, and what did you learn from it?
2. How do you think the parable of choosing the lowest seat at the wedding banquet challenges our assumptions about honor, success, and reputation, in today's culture?
3. Jesus says to invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, and the blind to our tables, and not those who are like us. Why do you think that he says this? What might Jesus be trying to teach us about the kingdom of God?
4. Who tends to be excluded from the "tables" we set in our lives today? Why do you think this is? And how do you think we can change it?
5. Jesus challenges the *motivation* behind hospitality. When you serve others or host events, what are your motives? What would it look like to make hospitality more about grace and less about hoping to gain something in return?
6. What is one specific step you can take this week to make space for someone who's been overlooked or excluded, and invite them to the table of God's grace?