

How To Lose Friends And Alienate People

(Luke 14:1, 7-14)



It's the Friday night of this Labour Day weekend in Thunder Bay, and a husband comes home from work. And as he pulls into the driveway, he sees that there is a rented tent in the back yard. Under the tent are tables and chairs for about forty people. And as he gets out of the car, he notices a bandstand and dance floor are assembled in one corner of the tent. And paper lanterns are hanging all around.

Bewildered, he thinks back to this morning when he left for work, and he's pretty sure all of this wasn't there then! A dreadful feeling hits him: "Oh. My. Gosh. It's our anniversary and I totally forgot! And judging by the scale of the party it must be one of the big ones, too!" But when he thinks a bit more and does the math, he realizes it isn't their 20th or 30th or 40th, it's not even the right date. So his next guess is, "Of course! This must be for a Labour Day party. Why do I *always* forget the parties my wife organizes?!"

He walks into the back yard to find his wife furiously basting a dozen chickens and to discover a pile of choice steaks in a cooler nearby, right next to a fully stocked bar. And he thinks, "Who in the world did we invite for dinner? The Royal Family?!"

He nervously waves at his wife, who smiles sweetly and says, "Our guests will be here any moment, dear." The husband is totally out to sea now. All he can do at this point is blankly stare at her and ask, "Who...?" "Oh, don't worry, dear", she says, "you wouldn't know them. I've invited twenty homeless men from the Shelter House in town, a refugee family from Syria, and a few poor prostitutes who were beaten up. Oh - and all the residents of a group home. And did I tell you? Not a single one is likely to ever pay us back!" It's at this point that the husband passes out.

Of course this didn't happen (at least not that I know of); I just made it up to show the impact that Jesus' words and actions had on the people in 1st-century Galilee. What Jesus taught and did went right against most common sense of that day, and a lot of people were upset, or even offended.

Many of Jesus' important teachings are centred around the table and shared meals, and this is no exception. Jesus is invited to a fancy party at a Pharisee's house. It's a society party among the leading citizens, for all the "rich cats", so

to speak. Everybody who is anybody is there. Bankers, doctors, lawyers, preachers, even senators from the Sanhedrin (well, maybe we shouldn't be surprised about senators showing up there...).

This particular Pharisee has a beautiful home located high in the hills overlooking Jerusalem. The ladies have come with their gold necklaces and their strings of pearls draped around their lovely low cut evening gowns. The men are looking stately in their purpled linens, with their gold rings on their fingers. There is the sophisticated small talk that goes with all sophisticated parties, with the sophisticated hors d'oeuvres and toothy smiles. Everybody is witty, charming and ever so clever. People are all having a good time - and they're all watching Jesus like hawks...

Jesus is invited, not because he is one of them, as part of the "glitterati", but because he is a curiosity who is famous for being in the news lately for blasphemy (because he forgave sins), for ritual uncleaness (because he ate with sinners and touched sick people), and for corrupting the Sabbath (because he healed people, and his disciples plucked grain from a field, and all that on the holy Sabbath).

Now if I were in Jesus' place, I would be on my best behaviour; I'd be careful not to talk with food in my mouth or put my elbows on the table. I would not unfold my napkin until the host does, and use it only to gently blot my mouth when needed. I'd use the long row of utensils from the outside in. I'd not push the plate away when I was finished, and I definitely would not burp. I'd not leave a used spoon in a cup, but would place it on the saucer. I'd never put my napkin on the table until the dinner is over - and so on and so forth.

Jesus is looking around and notices the opulence and wealth and pretence. He also notices how the guests look for ways to move up the social ladder - or up the table, in this case. He sees how they try to sit at the places of honour, next to important people. And so he calmly decides to... offend the guests. And the scene that follows becomes a lesson in how to lose friends and alienate people.

We have all been in those awkward situations when we are invited for dinner at someone's home, hovering around the dinner table, not sure where to sit. Most would not pick a place at the head the table or next to the host or hostess - unless, of course, we are invited to do so. That makes only perfect sense, and at first glance it seems that this is what Jesus is suggesting. But it is much more than that; Jesus takes it a *big* step further, much further than anyone could imagine.

Jesus plainly tells the guests they're only there to increase their status. "When someone invites you to dinner, you take the important seats. Then when somebody more important than you shows up, you're red-faced as you make your way to the only place left at the end of the table. You might as well have

gone and sat at there in the first place; then the host might say, 'Don't sit there - come, sit with me.' If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. So don't puff yourself up, but show some humility."

And when he has finished insulting the guests - he turns to the host to insult him, scolding him for who was included and especially who was *not* included for this dinner: "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends, the "old boys club" you're trying to impress and who you hope will return the favour. Invite people who *don't* have similar interests, who never get invited, the misfits and *unsophisticated* folks from the wrong side of the tracks and the trailer park. And no, they'll never be able to return the favour, but it *will* help God's realm become reality." (Notice? There are those random acts of kindness again!)

Jesus accuses these rich guests and their host of creating barriers between the rich and the poor, and worse: of using those barriers so *they* get ever richer and the poor even poorer. Those barriers are still here today. Ethnic groups, gay people, refugees, the homeless, the addicted and the mentally ill, they all face uphill battles. They just don't have the same opportunities as the nice middle class people who are well off. And those well-off people make sure it stays that way, they even think it's normal. And *that* is what Jesus is so ticked off about.

Of course his disciples try to pull Jesus to the side and say, "Um, you might want to back off a little bit? First you slam the seating protocol, and as if that isn't rude enough, now you're slamming the guest list. Don't you realize how influential our host is? He could do a lot of good for us! All you have to do is smile and keep your elbows off the table - or this will be our last dinner invitation. But keep this up, and we'll be thrown out before dessert!"

So *why* does Jesus have to stir up trouble? Why does he criticize people who invite him into their own homes? Why can't Jesus leave a pleasant enough dinner party simply alone? Remember, hospitality was sacred in those times.

It is because Jesus understands what is at stake. We have to learn that at God's table there is no need to jockey for position, because all are equally welcome. There are no second hand or third hand human beings. In God's Kingdom, in God's dream for us, the least, the poor and marginalized will be the greatest, and the last will be first. Jesus is host at a table where no person is better than another. So our guest list - who is in and who is out - has *everything* to do with being Christ's church.

This story asks us an important question: what would Jesus have said to you and me and everybody else if he were invited at one of our dinner parties? Who would he notice are missing from our circle? Would he create a scene - or would he have a really good time? Something to chew on... Amen.