

*“Who’s Invited?”*

*Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14*

*September 1, 2013*

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Ah, weddings! If you’ve planned one or are in the process of planning one, you know some of the most taxing decisions are who gets invited and where they are seated. Heaven forbid that Aunt Brunhilde is seated next to her brother’s child, whom she is sure is a ne’er-do-well and the prototype for the Prodigal Son.

Luckily, most weddings today assign seats and so are at little risk of the social impropriety Jesus speaks of in today’s Gospel (Luke 14:1, 7-14) when, apparently, there was a bit of clamoring for the choicest seats. My study Bible titles today’s Gospel passage “humility and hospitality” in which Jesus’ instruction is painfully clear. *“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.”*

So while the risk that you or I will sit in the wrong place at a wedding, just TRY to save a seat on the front row of your son or daughter’s elementary school concert. Many schools warn parents against this practice prior to the event, enforcement guaranteed by school officials and other parents!

But Jesus, as is so often the case, goes “from preachin’ to meddlin.” *“He also said to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends...in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But...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.’”*

It could be worse. I'm glad Jesus said "a luncheon or a dinner" and not "a wedding." The average cost of a 2012 wedding was between \$27,000 (Reuters) and \$28,400 (CNN Money). In Jesus' time weddings were multiple day affairs, still the case in other parts of the world and increasingly so in the U.S. as we accommodate our far-flung families and extravagant tastes.

The deeper question for Jesus and us is "Who's Invited?" It is at once a no-brainer AND one of the hardest values for us to uphold as a faith community. Our historic Methodist commitment is that EVERYONE is welcome: at the Lord's table, in our churches, and here at Mary Taylor Memorial where we declare weekly on the cover of the liturgy "*Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.*"

At the same time, Methodists in all our branches, including United Methodism, have roots in pietism, the notion that each person has personal responsibility for living a holy life AND being part of a community that holds one another accountable. In the earliest days of Methodism, weekly meetings of the societies gathered to ask one another "*How goes it with your soul?*" and "*What works of charity have you done?*" As American Methodism spread across the continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one was given a membership card upon joining the Methodist societies. This was not a lifetime pass, either. Each quarter of the year, members were examined for their life and conduct. Some of you are old enough to remember, as I do, the Quarterly Conference. As a child I remember these as meetings of what was then called the Official Board (today's Church Council), but their roots were in this quarterly practice of self-examination regarding holy living.

These practices, well-intended, leave us vulnerable to a subtle or even unconscious vetting. Some of it is based on the usual criterion, easily identifiable things like appearance and language. Other, less visible things, like where we live and where we're from and what we do, come later.

The temptation to exclude is always there. It is not always malicious; sometimes it is just thoughtless. A decade ago a church was considering becoming a Reconciling Congregation, open to all regardless of sexual orientation. They invited a nearby pastor who had led a similar process in another church to come and speak about it with a team of leaders. In the course of the conversation that pastor observed that *“Homophobia is the last socially acceptable prejudice.”* A member of the leadership team quickly replied, *“No, prejudice against people with handicapping conditions, mental and physical, is still socially acceptable.”*

That response was correct and I said so, for I was the guest pastor invited by Mary Taylor Memorial’s leaders and I learned something important from Mary Taylor Memorial that day. No matter how committed we are to inclusivity, we need reminding exactly how wide Jesus’ casts the net: this wide (point to cross).

As for Jesus’ command to throw a feast for those who can’t pay you back: it is a challenge but not an insurmountable one. As a church we monthly honor this admonition with our Community Supper here; and on alternate months in Bridgeport. Others serve at the Beth-el Center; or at Christian Community Action in New Haven. These literal banquets do not include the offerings to fight cancer, diabetes and many other conditions that help people who are not even known to us except by their affliction. For those who work for the elimination of these illnesses and those who support them, thanks be to God.

Jesus’ invites us to labor and pray for the time that human distinctions do not distract us from seeing our neighbor as God sees them: as sinners redeemed and of inestimable worth. For that is what we are, too: sinners redeemed and of inestimable worth. Its how God sees us, too. Who’s invited? All of us. Let’s renew our commitment to extend God’s invitation to all.