

“Where Do You Go From Here?”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
BASED ON THE THEME, “GO! COMMUNITY”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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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.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, 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; ⁹and 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.

¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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

There are a lot of times in life when you have to decide where you will go from that point on. Certainly it is an issue many of us face on the highways, although those talking GPS gizmos seem to help with that some. I suspect we all have had to answer that question when something difficult happens. Our first girl friend or boy friend breaks up with us and we wonder, where do we go from here? We finish college and maybe we wonder where we will go from there. We lose a job or get to a point in a job and have to figure out where to go next.

The Scripture lesson this morning tells of a dinner party where Jesus suggests an alternative seating arrangement that might have left the guests wondering, where do we go from here? This passage starts out about a fancy dinner at a bigwig’s house but it pretty quickly becomes less about food and appears on the surface to be more about etiquette. So what now, we have Jesus as Miss Manners? Who do you invite where do you seat them, guests of honor and all that stuff? Any mother of the bride can sympathize if she had difficulty with the seating chart at the wedding reception. Let’s see, can’t put those two side by side, one’s a Gator and

the other is Seminole. Nope, that one is a Democrat and this one's a Republican. It is very complicated.

But this isn't really about etiquette or seating charts. It isn't even a strategy for looking humble so you will be exalted. You know that's what we do with a lot of Jesus' advice. We act like he is a holy Dear Abby more than even a religious Miss Manners. I have to believe that Jesus is doing more here than simply giving us advice on how to get ahead by pretending to be humble. That sounds too much like my favorite line about the acting profession. It is a line my daughter is tired of hearing but I love it. Supposedly some famous actor said once that acting is all about honesty and if you can fake that you have it made! So I don't think Jesus is just giving us a hint about how to fake humility.

In fact, one of the things that I find very troubling about faith in Jesus is that he seems much more intent on disrupting my comfort and upsetting my assumptions about faith than in comforting me and making me feel better about my flaws, prejudices, and my often shallow spirituality. I think we expect faith to be a comfort to us, and I think it is, but I don't think that is God's goal. I think God's goal is much more to shape us and transform us into what God intended us to be than to help us feel better about who we are. The funny thing is that the more I realize that God is working to transform me, the more I have actually learned to accept who far short I fall normally. I just have to work on trusting the process God is using to transform me. But enough about me,

let's look at what may really be at the heart of this passage.

Luke says after Jesus watches the other guests jockeying for the best seat in the house he tells a parable. It really isn't a parable it isn't even a story. It is pretty plainly a criticism of the values we place on people based on the boundaries and values of society instead of based on God's values.

David Lose writes in his blog that, he thinks "there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye. Etiquette, after all, is not simply about manners in the ancient world; it's about honor and shame and social position and political standing, and these things matter more than just about anything in Jesus' day. So he's not simply giving good advice. Rather, he's turning convention on its head. He's challenging the status quo. He's inciting something of a social revolution. And for all these reasons he's inviting the death sentence he eventually gets.

He dares not only to stand outside the social order of his day; he dares not only to call that social order – and *all* social orders – into question; but he also says these things are *not of God*. Jesus proclaims here and throughout the gospel that in the kingdom of God there are no pecking orders. And while that sounds at first blush like it ought to be good news, it throws us into radical dependence on God's grace and God's grace alone. We can't stand, that is, on our accomplishments, or our wealth, or positive attributes, or good looks, or strengths, or IQ, or our movement up or down the reigning pecking order. There

is, suddenly, *nothing* we can do to establish ourselves before God and the world except rely upon God's desire to be in relationship with us and with all people. Which means that we have no claim on God; rather, we have been claimed by God and invited to love others as we've been loved."¹

David Lose's point it seems to me helps us see that once again, Jesus is using an everyday example to challenge us to rethink our worldview and then from that, reset our activities and priorities. Perhaps most of all Jesus is just inviting us to experience what God wants us to experience – community. But what kind of community? That's what the whole "GO! Community" event was about. It was about reshaping our experience of the relationships God invites us to be blessed by. If we can only be blessed by relationships with those who can do something for us, we have a pretty limited understanding of relationships.

Dan Clendenin tells about a couple of experiences that made him understand the blessing of relationships in a fresh way. He said he was in Uganda in 2004. He was with a group that was treated to a feast by two people who fit Jesus' description. "They were both poor, one was blind, and the other person was lame and crippled." But in a remarkable act of hospitality they sang songs they had composed just for the occasion that expressed appreciation for their guests, using their individual names, and "threw the best party with the best food they

had. In this instance, as is also the case in the gospels, food was a metaphor not of power, envy, and social posturing, but of joyful celebration of the God who exalts the humble and humbles the exalted."

Clendenin also tells of a wedding that he went to for his friend's daughter. Lisa had wanted to invite the entire church where her husband-to-be was pastor, but it would cost too much. Instead, "after the service, they had the local police block off the main street in downtown Waco, Texas. Guests danced in the streets and enjoyed refreshments from a Baskins Robbins ice cream cart. The gazebo in the concrete park next to the theatre sheltered the wedding cake.

"Lisa's husband, Chris, had made friends with a number of homeless men who lived under a bridge. As a pastor, Chris had employed these men for odd jobs at his church. "Coyote," the leader of his homeless friends, came to the wedding in his usual attire of jeans with holes in the knees, a scraggly beard, and unwashed hair. He organized his homeless friends to clean up the streets after the wedding, then sat on the curb with a big smile and smoked a cigar.

"Another guest was Lisa's next door African-American neighbor. The little girl loved to spend time with Lisa, and really wanted to come to her wedding. So the mother, the daughter, and the grandfather all came. The 70 year-old grandfather was soon the center of attraction as he went out on the street and danced to the music. Soon the college girls were vying to dance with him. As passersby strolled by and inquired about what was happening, they

¹ David Lose, workingpreacher.org, 8/22/10.

too were invited to the wedding. There were guests dressed in their nicest clothes alongside guests who wouldn't feel at home at a formal occasion. However they dressed, on this occasion every person felt welcomed as an honored guest, just as God himself welcomes us to himself, and invites us to welcome each other."²

So once again, as we try to figure out what it means to mean it when we say "no matter who you are, or where you are on your journey of life, you are welcome here," it seems to me one thing we are saying is that relationship is more important even than correct theology or perfect doctrine or dogma. It seems to me the flaw that the religious leaders suffered was they were more concerned with their theology than they were with relationships that God invites us to enter into so that we might be blessed.

So where do we go from here? Well, Tuesday night we will welcome some folks from the Turkish Amity Center who will share a traditional Turkish meal with us and also share some of their traditions as Muslims. It is an opportunity to enter into relationships with folks from a different culture and religion. Maybe we can find out if they are all terrorists or not.

Where do we go from here? It seems to me we are still in the process of being and becoming that "GO! Community" where we are trying to welcome anyone, but also grow in our service to others in God's name.

² Dan Clendenin "A Spirituality of Food," journeywithjesus.net, 8/23/10.

Another part of that process is continuing to grow in faith, knowing that Christ rarely leaves us comfortable where we are because where we are isn't finished. Our theology is incomplete, our relationships are incomplete, our faith is incomplete. If nothing else we are a community called by God to continue to go towards the reality that God intends to create – what Jesus called the kingdom of God.

This new creation, this new community is the realm of God, and God is making all things new. Where do we go from here? We go out into the world to share God's invitation to be part of this new reality and to experience the transforming love of God. AMEN.