

Come to the Table 09/17/2023

Jesus mentions in this text a wonderful mess that often exists in human hearts...this entangled ball of pride and inviting rich neighbors, pandering to the famous and powerful people too. How we seek to advance ourselves by our association to rich, powerful people.

Like in this story. There was this guy named George who had a friend who had pride issues. He an inflated opinion of himself based on the rich and famous people he knew, acting all high and mighty, just like it says in our text.

Being a good friend, George decided to help his friend lose some of his pride. Subtly, George mentioned that he knew...

Dwayne Johnson, the Rock, the wrestler and movie star. His friend snarled unimpressed, "Oh, yeah, prove it."

In a few minutes, they were in front of a large house near the beach. After knocking, out came Dwayne Johnson saying, "Come on in, George, and bring your friend."

On the way home the friend grudgingly said, "OK, so you know Dwayne Johnson. But everyone probably knows one famous person, not that big of a deal."

Obviously, this friend needed more work, needle wasn't moving on being less prideful. So, George continued his pursuit of humbling him and dropped this juicy bait in front of him.

"Yes, he and I and the president are well-acquainted."

After which his friend threw up his hands and cried out, "No way! I'll pay for the airplane tickets--let's go to D.C. and see."

They arrive at the White House, out came the president, greeting them with, "Come on in, George, and bring your friend."

Later George's friend looking slightly sheepish and admitted, "Well, yeah, you do know the president. Whatever."

Clearly George's friend needed a little further deflation. So, George remarked casually...

"Yeah, but you know the pope has a nicer office."

"What!" yelled his wide-eyed friend. "You know the pope! I'll bet you ten thousand dollars you can't even get in to see him."

In a few days, they were in Rome, with George knocking on a door to the Vatican. A cardinal came out extending his hand to George saying, "Come on in, George! But your friend will have to stay outside."

About an hour went by, when out came the pope onto the balcony, waving at the crowd, with one arm around George.

Later, outside, George looked around for his friend and found that he had fainted in the courtyard.

Complete face plant.

George rushed over, helped his friend up, and feeling a bit sheepish himself, apologized for shocking him so badly with knowing the pope.

But his friend, visibly shaken, shaking his head, and now truly humbled said in a dazed voice, "It's not that you knew the pope. It was the crowd! They kept asking each other, 'Who's the guy with George?'"

Who's the guy with George? I have to thank James S. Hewett for that wonderful story.

George's friend proves Proverbs 16 from the King James...

"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." And he experienced what the Message warned, "**If you walk around all high and mighty, you're going to end up flat on your face.**"

This story helps remind us of the foolishness of pride and chasing after the rich and famous for favors, like the host was doing in Jesus' teaching.

Yes, Jesus is teaching his host to not just invite rich neighbors or the famous or powerful and thereby putting your faith in how the world works. Currying favor and influence by those you know. Very human.

Instead, Jesus is teaching this host to be just as intentional in including the least of these, the misfits in this world, the ones who don't fit in and are often overlooked, shunned and shunted to the margins.

Invite the lame, blind, poor, and crippled. Thereby, putting your faith in God and how his Kingdom works. And you will receive abundant blessing from God.

Sometimes parties are hosted so you can rub elbows with the rich and powerful and you can look special by extension. Look who I know! Kind of human nature.

In these verses, Jesus isn't saying you can't have rich neighbors or famous, powerful friends. Instead, he is inviting the host to open up his thinking, to become more comfortable with not being in control, more comfortable with being surprised by those who come to the table.

Jesus is saying, consider that coming to the table is more than being familiar with others or advancing self. Instead, we should adopt a Kingdom outlook, more about showing kindness, being gracious, extending hospitality and being caring to those truly in need.

To those God sees as the “apple of his eye” and on whom God’s favor rests, to the ones who are truly the most important.

You know, Jesus isn’t even saying you should NOT invite your famous friends to your party. Rather, Jesus is saying when you have a banquet, a big party...ALSO intentionally and specifically invite those who are not famous, who are not rich. Be on the lookout for those less fortunate, the least of these.

From the Message, “Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks.” The NIV describes them as the poor, crippled, lame and blind. ALSO invite them to your table. Those who live more on the margins of life.

I have a side of my family, my Strom relatives, that were a lot of fun getting together with growing up. They were not rich or famous. But they were some of my favorite people when I was a kid.

We’d get together for deer hunting weekends or a special family occasion, like a significant wedding anniversary or retirement.

They would tell stories on each other that had tears of laughter running down our cheeks. Leaving us longing for a rejoinder. Like share a story, lob a story back, equally or even more embarrassing and funny!

At one gathering, as I fully expected to enjoy my relatives. I saw they had invited a new person, the town’s homeless person. And in fact, as a town, they had helped build him a small home in the town. He was included in their lives, loved, and invited to our get together.

At first, I wasn’t excited to have to share my fun relatives and the anticipated fun gathering with a stranger. A stranger who literally was on the other side, the wrong side of the train tracks in Tamarack, MN.

But throughout the evening, he had fun stories, amazing life experiences that was his contribution to the family potluck. Instead of a tatter tot hotdish, he shared his life.

And I was blessed. My relatives followed Jesus’ instructions, and I grew in wisdom, in lived experience of valuing, offering dignity and honoring EVERY life.

As we reflect on this teaching from Jesus, we have to ask ourselves, “What happens when we host or go to dinner and don’t know who to expect?”

“Have you ever had an unexpected guest or new person who you shared a meal with and found out the experience was better than you had anticipated?”

About four years ago now, I was at a conference eating breakfast. And I am not what you would call a morning person. Not at all. Even my cats watch me wake up from a distance.

I was so grateful I had this little dinning room off to the side of the conference all to myself. Peaceful breakfast, slowly waking up. Until...

A woman I had never met, came into that small dinning area, with her breakfast in hand. My spirits sank a little, no more private breakfast to get my act together and get ready to face the world.

And then she starting talking to me.

Ah...! My brain isn't working yet.

She introduced herself..."Hi my name is Amy, what's your name?"

I thought I had misheard her in my morning stupor. And had her repeat herself.

And I started laughing as I responded, "Hi Amy, my name is Amy. Nice to meet you!"

And then we kind of just started talking about all sorts of things and it was such a pleasant surprise! We are grateful to this day, to God for that surprise blessing at breakfast.

I'm sure we share this in common at times. That we have all experienced what it feels like to be the outsider in a group. Maybe the newbie, the new person at a meal or pot luck or fellowship time.

It is the feeling when everyone else knows each other, is comfortable with one another, has inside stories and inside jokes and inside experiences together.

You find yourself sitting there looking around and asking the question, "Who are these people, and will anyone talk with me?" Coincidentally enough, by the end of the meal, we find ourselves meeting new people and gaining new insights. Being blessed.

It is God that calls us to notice and intentionally and specifically invite those that may not be in our comfort zones. It is God that calls us out of our places of familiarity, into places of fellowship at the table that more accurately resembles God's heart and God's Kingdom.

He stretches us and blesses us in those moments.

Dear friends, you are a child of the Most High God. As his beloved, God makes room for you at His table now and in the world to come. In Christ, you are always,,welcomed and included and honored. It is such good news!

Therefore, because that is true, we are free to welcome, include and honor others now, today. We can be open to new encounters, we can be ambassadors of radical welcome and invitation and honoring of others.

Because we are securely held in God's arms, sure of God's love for us. Secure in our seat at the table, secure about our future.

As we close, we have a unique opportunity today to respond to our text. It was so fun to see God's timing on things. Did you notice the sermon title in our series of Coming to the Table? No worries, it is Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner?

Many of us will be participating in Party in the Park, such a gift to us. Everyone has been invited and welcomed. Our Party in the Park is a wonderful opportunity to be hospitable and gracious.

We can be kind hosts to whomever comes to this amazing event. We have no idea who is coming! But it doesn't matter.

Because based on Jesus' teaching here, we will enjoy them and be gracious and outgoing, and host in a way that pleases God. Pleasing God is its own kind of blessing.

And not only that, it just gets better, but we will also host in a way in which we will be a blessing to others AND we are promised we will be abundantly blessed later when God's Kingdom comes fully.

And that, my friends, are wonderful wonderful truths for us to experience and live into today!