

Goal of Discipleship

Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7 – 14 & Hebrews 13:1 – 8 & 15 – 16

Let me start today's message by sharing a situation that is similar to what Jesus faced in our Gospel story today from the Gospel of Luke.

Sometime ago I did a funeral for a popular man within the community and church. A very large group of people showed up for the funeral service. After the funeral service I announced that the immediate family and I were going to the cemetery to have a brief graveside service and the rest of the large crowd was invited to go to our Fellowship Hall for a meal in honor of the deceased.

After the brief graveside service I left before the family left and returned to the church's Fellowship Hall. Upon enter the Hall I noticed that the only tables left with no one sitting at were in the back of the Fellowship Hall. All the tables near the food and desert tables were filled with people. I then walked around to the four closest tables near the food and desert tables and asked the people seated there if they would move to the back tables so that the immediate family would sit at the places of honor. Everyone moved but some gave me a strange look and some looked embarrassed.

When the immediate family arrived, they took their place nearest the food and desert tables.

It tells us in Luke 14 that Jesus had been invited for a dinner party at the house of a prominent Pharisee but why was Jesus invited? Jesus was not a real popular person amongst the Pharisees after all. Based on our text from Luke I suspect Jesus was not invited out of love. In fact, it looks like the inviting Pharisee was setting Jesus up to cause Jesus to lose face. The goal of the dinner party was to embarrass Jesus!

It is neither accidental nor coincidental that Jesus immediately encounters a man with 'dropsy' which likely meant that the man's breathing was labored and his face, legs, and hands were swollen because his cardio-pulmonary problem had caused fluid to build up throughout his body. He probably looked pathetic!

As his devious host suspected, Jesus cannot resist the urge to help. This is hard to imagine that a man of God, the Pharisee, has set up this trap for Jesus because it is the Sabbath and healing is not lawful on the Sabbath. Can you believe that – healing was unlawful on the Sabbath. This is one way the Pharisee's had perverted God's law!

Would it be all right to heal this man? Would it be right to heal on the Sabbath? The dinner party sat in silence as Jesus heals the man! The dinner party was off to a really rocky start!

Have you ever been to a meal or dinner party and you did not know where you should sit down? There were no place cards for each person to show them where to sit down. The seating chart was not available. All the guest chose their own seats!

Things are getting even worst when in reaction to people's jockeying for the most important seats at the dining table Jesus begins to urge a bit of humility. Rather than brashly trying to get the best seat in the house, Jesus talks about humility. At the dinner party, it seems everybody wanted the best seat at the party. Everybody wanted the 'Look at Me!' seats!

I wonder if some of the people started to blush. Probably as they struggled for the seats nearest the host at the dining table. But Jesus is not done here, he has more to say and it is not what you would call 'Emily Post' etiquette! What Jesus shares is a parable that directly rebukes the host for not caring for the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely of the world the way God wants us to!

At church pot luck dinners, I have always been asked to do the blessing of the meal. And along with that I have been chosen to decide the order in which the tables will go to the food tables to get their food. I have been offered many times a personal donation or bribes by a table to go first. I have even had a table say to me – 'Pastor Rich, here is a donation to the church if you let us go first!' But there always is that table, the last table, which I was usually seated at, that I would say these words to – 'Your scripture passage for today is *The last will be first and the first will be last so you are truly blessed!* You know, that table never really smiled at me and said 'Thank you Pastor!' In fact, that last table was always where I sat!

Luke does not tell us how the Sabbath Day dinner party ends. But you have the feeling that when Jesus left, the host did not smile and say 'Thanks for coming and come again!' I would guess the host probably said to a friend – 'That did not go as planned!'

When we next see Jesus at a dinner in the next chapter of Luke's Gospel, it is in the company of sinners with the Pharisees on the outside looking in. The Pharisees are sneering at Jesus in judgement. They did not get it. Not ever!

We know who Jesus' kind of people were. The question to ask ourselves is whether Jesus' kind of people are our kind of people. And as a congregation, the question we need to ask ourselves is whether Jesus' kind of people are our kind of people.

Do you try and get the best seat at Jesus' party or do you practice humility and let the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely of the world get the best seat? Do we try and get the best seats at Jesus' party or do we practice humility and let the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely of the world get the best seat?

Often the goal of discipleship is forgotten to us. We often forget the goal of discipleship! The goal is to live like Jesus and to become like Jesus. Really, the goal of discipleship is to live like Jesus and become like Jesus.

We are supposed to be generous and sacrificial like Jesus. This is not a metaphor or some overblown aspiration! This is the goal of discipleship!

I know it is hard in this world of gluttony and over indulgence. But we are called to be generous and sacrificial like Jesus. That is the goal of discipleship.

Oh, it may involve suffering. It may involve real sacrifice of various kinds. But, of course, there is always a danger lurking here. In Hebrews 13 we find it spelled out for us. The danger is turning these attempts to live like Jesus into something that does an end run on Jesus' sacrifice by tempting us to think that it is our obedience that gets us rewarded with a free trip to heaven.

I am not preaching that kind of message. I am not telling you that if you love Jesus and become like Jesus, your reward is a free trip to heaven. I know a lot of you would like a message like that! And you would thank me for such a message. You would say – 'Nice message and thank you Pastor! Thank you for telling me what to do to make sure God will love me again!'

But a message like that would undercut God's grace. We need to go outside of the city, the chapel, and our comfort zone as Hebrews 13 commands us to do. If we do this, we will notice that Jesus did what we never can do: his perfect sacrifice alone is what saves us. His perfect sacrifice for us is all the grace we need.

It is not about us! The calling and goal of our discipleship is to be like Jesus and become like Jesus. His grace has already sealed our destination!

It is not about you! The calling and goal of our discipleship is to be like Jesus and become like Jesus. His grace has already sealed your destination!

Given the enormity of Jesus' saving grace, everything we do to be like Jesus is just one giant and extended way for us to say – 'Thank you Jesus!' And that is what Hebrews 13 commands indeed!

Given the enormity of Jesus' saving grace, everything you do to be like Jesus is just one giant and extended way for you to say – 'Thank you Jesus!' And that is what Hebrews 13 commands indeed!

Let us pray:

O God, let us go forth in love with Jesus. Let us be friendly and welcome to all God's people especially the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely of the world. Let us welcome to stranger and always be open to the presence of the angels themselves hidden in our midst. And let us remember that in all things, the Lord is our helper and we should not be afraid! AMEN.