

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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.”

In rural, southern Ohio I grew up attending a small cinderblock school and because we lived so far from the town's middle school, my school continued through grade seven. Like several of my elementary school peers, my favorite class was Phys Ed. In reality we could have renamed the Phys Ed class as the 'Kickball' class because that was the extent of our activity. Every week for about seven years the teacher would stand us in line, and randomly appoint two captains to draft their teammates. Though the captains were appointed randomly, the selections by the captains were always predictable. The most skilled players, Mike and Butch, were always the first selected. The least skilled, Lisa, Randy and Roy were always the last three selected, and consistently in that order. Lisa didn't seem to mind, so much, but every week Randy and Roy quietly hung their heads as the last picked for their teams – the draft always ended Lisa, Randy, Roy.

It was either in the fifth or sixth grade when it was my turn again to be a captain and draft my team. I won the coin toss which secured the top draft choice, and as the obvious choices, Mike and Butch began stepping toward me wondering which of the two I would choose. I surprised myself and I surprised others when I called out Roy's name as my top choice – most surprised was Roy. His eyes lit up as he was the first to join my team. I seem to recall praying a quiet prayer hoping my counterpart, the other captain, would catch on to what I was doing and then choose Randy – so I would not have to have both Roy and Randy on my team. Instead, he chose Mike. I surprised myself again when I chose Randy as my second draft choice. My counterpart then chose Butch. I chose Lisa – I didn't know what come over me. And the draft continued until my team was comprised of those who were always chosen late in the draft, and all top prospects joined the other team.

Because I got first pick, the other team got to kick first. I suspected some divine intervention caused me to choose the team I had so I quietly hoped again for that divine intervention to carry over into the game. How cool would it be when we won?! Well, we got destroyed. The game was messy. I don't believe we scored a single run, and we struggled to secure a single out against the other team. But I remember our team's energy, excitement and the joy in which our team played. I recall the unfamiliar smiles and laughter of Roy, Randy and Lisa. I played kickball on that playground nearly every week for seven years, and this is the only kickball game I remember. Why is that?

What would happen if we approached the game of life in a similar fashion?

Jesus is at a Pharisee's house and this Pharisee was more like Mike and Butch, and less like Roy and Randy. He was a leader amongst leaders and there is a hint that he invited Jesus just to keep a close eye on him. Jesus was gaining a reputation, becoming well known, and the jury was still out to determine if this was good or not so good for the Pharisees, who notoriously honored tradition and strictly observed the written law. Prior to the story in today's passage, when Jesus entered the banquet he noticed a man suffering from a physical ailment. It was a sabbath day and Jesus asked the Pharisees if it was lawful to cure people on the sabbath (the law forbid any work be accomplished on the sabbath). The Pharisees chose not to answer Jesus, so Jesus healed the man right then and there in front of them. He then asked, "If your son were to fall in a well on the sabbath, would you not pull him out?" They again chose not to answer him, but were catching on that in inviting Jesus the host Pharisee spent one of his draft choices on a Roy or a Randy, as Jesus was neither a Mike nor a Butch.

The Pharisees continued to observe Jesus and Jesus observed the guests who were arriving to the wedding banquet. The most distinguished guests were invited to the place of honor, and some were placing themselves at this honored table. Some were then humiliated when they were told to move to less honorable places, that they may not be as important as they thought they were. Jesus suggests, “Why not seat yourself at the lowliest place, and be invited to move up toward an honorable place” – people will then see you as moving up in prestige. And, Jesus explains, when you become the host of an event, do not invite those who can repay you, those who can help you to climb the social ladder: Instead, invite the poor, the ones who are in no position to repay you, who cannot boost your social status.

For those first century Pharisees and their guests, the social and religious status were blurred together. Those who were deemed closer to God were invited closer to the place of honor. Unlike the social structure either of that time or of our time, God’s invitation is equal for all. God’s grace is broad enough to welcome all to be close to God, all to be invited to this place of honor. And as opposed to the host who is continually maneuvering guests to benefit himself, God places all together at the place of honor. Not only are we invited to such a place of honor, we are invited to invite others to this place which supersedes social status. What would it look like for those with means to invite those who are perceived to be without means. For those with perceived social status, economic status to befriend those with limited social status or low economic status: To befriend the ones Jesus speaks of; the poor, the lame, the blind. To invite the ones who are judged by what they do not have instead of being recognized for and embraced as the gifts they are, the gifts they offer. What would it look like?

Over the last four decades in the United States, the financial circumstances into which children have been born have increasingly determined their financial circumstances as adults. If you are born poor, you remain poor. If rich, you remain rich. A recent study conducted in Harvard University's Department of Economics, and publicized by the New York Times has uncovered a powerful exception to that pattern.¹ This research has found that poor children who live in an area where people have more friendships that cut across class and socioeconomic lines significantly increases the amount these children earn in adulthood. Researchers have concluded that economic connectedness is a better predictor of a community's upward mobility than any other characteristic studied. When poor families and children have nonpoor friends the economic stability increases within those families and children; not because these new friends are supplementing the families income. But because of relationship, which expands one's social network, one's connectedness. The study argues that individuals and families can be raised from poverty through relationship.

Two thousand years prior to this study Jesus said to those who follow his way, "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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Luncheons and dinners were all about networking, social capital, and some members in the community were never invited. Invite them, Jesus says, "and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." In this messy playground of life,

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/01/upshot/rich-poor-friendships.html>

great joy is to be found when one with means joins a team of those who are always the last chosen.

We are developing an event to be held here on October 1, inviting other churches and faith communities to join us as we host the authors of *Freeing Congregational Mission*, a book we studied earlier in the year. The book offers theological reasoning and practical guidance for churches to build partnerships with community organizations, connecting member to member. As part of our continued response to the horror that took place on the East Side in May, and our continued response to the injustices which contributed to such horror, East Side nonprofits will be promoting their ministries at this event. I invite you to mark your calendar, to participate, that you may choose to join a team. In the coming weeks more information and registration will begin. Consider yourselves draft prospects of a very eclectic team for a game which may be messy, but one that is filled with great joy.

In the name of the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.