

Blessed...Changed

It may seem like a surprise to you that Jesus was friends with Pharisees. Back at the end of chapter eleven of Luke's gospel, Jesus was invited to a Pharisee's house for dinner on the Sabbath. This might seem like a small detail, but it's actually quite significant.

Being invited to someone's house for dinner was a way to climb up the social ladder but being invited for the Sabbath meal meant you were almost family. We usually think of the Pharisees as 'the opposition.' but Jesus didn't always behave that way.

In chapter 12, we find Jesus in the synagogue, healing a woman with a bent back – on the Sabbath. It could have been the week after he'd had dinner with the Pharisee or it could have been another Sabbath, but Luke seems to be organizing his story about these Sabbath events. The Pharisees always seem to be somewhere in the picture.

We know that some of the Pharisees cared about Jesus, because by the end of chapter 13, they come to warn him that Herod wants to kill him. As much as we want to see them as enemies, these Pharisees are behaving remarkably like friends. But not all of them and that becomes clearer when the Pharisees are looking for a way to trap Jesus. They are watching him.

Which brings us to the 14th chapter of Luke's gospel. We pick up the story on a third Sabbath day, and this one combines the activities of the other two Sabbath's that Luke has described. Jesus has just healed someone and now he is at another Pharisee's house for dinner. Not just any Pharisee, either. The host of this Sabbath meal is a leader.

Now, according to Luke, Jesus enjoys food. There are more references to eating, banquets, and being at the table in Luke than in any other gospel. So here we find Jesus at a meal in a Pharisee's home and – as is his habit – Jesus is teaching while everyone eats. And his teaching is based on what he observes in his students.

Jesus was not giving a lesson in table manners here. He was explaining, for the people gathered at that Pharisee's table, just how different the rules are in the kingdom of God. To understand just how radical this teaching was, we need to remember the social system that was in place at the time.

It was a system of patronage, where honor and favors were the currency. As a benefactor, favors owed to you by others gave you a higher ranking in society. Mealtime was often the place where status was on display. Guests of honor sat near the host. If you were less important, you sat farther away. If you didn't matter at all, you weren't even invited.

But Jesus has a different idea for the way things ought to work. By now, we should be familiar with Luke's focus on turning expectations upside down. As Jesus watched the guests at this Pharisee's house jockeying for good positions at the table, he saw a double teaching opportunity, and he grabbed it.

First, he addressed the guests. He reminded them of the advice found in Proverbs: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of the noble.

While this was practical social advice for his listeners, it included a reminder that the people present at the table belonged to God, not Rome. Jesus was reinforcing their identity as children of Israel. The Roman practice of self-promotion did not fit well with the prophet Micah's reminder to "walk humbly with your God."

Maybe the leader of the Pharisees may have seen Jesus as an equal because of his keen understanding of the scripture and what a great teacher he was wherever he traveled.

Or the leader of the Pharisees may have even seen Jesus as a step up the social ladder from himself. But this “trying to improve one’s social status” was exactly what Jesus came to challenge. Jesus has no intention of letting his host off the hook when it came to table manners in the Kingdom of God.

“You’re inviting the wrong people” Jesus told him. “By including only friends, family and those who can advance your status, you are no better than these guests who are fighting over the best seat in the house. You’re trying to make yourself look good by surrounding yourself with “important” people, while you ignore the ones who should be enjoying your hospitality.

You see, the Pharisee and the Pharisee’s guests might have thought they were just behaving according to the social expectations of their time, but those expectations pointed to a basic human need. It’s a need that we all experience. We need to belong. We need to know our place in the world is secure. We want to be recognized. We want to feel like we matter to the world, that we have something to offer, that we are important, at least to someone. We need to feel accepted. We need to feel loved.

The social climbing and jockeying for positions of importance Jesus saw around the Pharisee’s table don’t seem that much different from what we experience today. People still feel the need to justify their standing in the community or the organization. We long to belong. We crave being accepted. It happens in the schoolyard and in the workplace. It happens any place people gather in groups.

It happens in church. Whether we want to admit it or not, we like to impress others with the work we do for the church, the positions of leadership we hold, how often we show up, how much we put in the offering plate, how much we pray, how well we know the Bible. We like to impress people with our righteousness.

But Jesus says, “You don’t need to try to impress anyone with your righteousness. The only one whose opinion of you matters is God and God knows your heart. God knows how far short of righteousness you really fall, and yet God loves you anyway.

To the guests, Jesus says, “Don’t seat yourself too high up the table but take the lowest place. Show the kind of humility that honors God.” And to the hosts, Jesus says “Don’t invite those who can repay you, but those who can’t. Instead of looking for ways to look down on people, to consider them as less important than you are, find ways to lift others up and stand beside them.

Jesus tells us that we will be blessed when we do that. So what is a blessing? Where do you get a blessing? What makes a blessing in the first place? Earlier in Luke, Mary says in her protest song, “Blessed is she that believes.” Later in Luke, Jesus says “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and blessed are you that hunger now, for you will be filled.”

In these examples, the “blessing” seems to show up in strange moments. Mary reflects on the disorienting news of her pregnancy after visiting her relative Elizabeth. During that time, she says, Blessed is she who believed.” We have no evidence that Mary is excited about being pregnant until she spends time with Elizabeth. She is confused about how any of this is going to work. Jesus himself uses that word “blessing” to describe the condition of those who are poor and hungry. Jesus says that inviting the forgotten to the fancy dinner is what will bless us. Given all the ways we imagine what a blessing is, it doesn’t make sense, does it?

It appears then, that blessings are not neatly wrapped in packages and stuffed under the Christmas tree. Blessings help us re-imagine the world that we live in. It is a gift to re-imagine our society. That word, blessing has come to evolve over time, with many people associating “blessing” with “a thing that is good.” But it seems to mean, at least in other ways it is used in scripture “a thing that changes us for the better.”

In her novel *Parable of the Sower* written in 1993, Octavia Butler speaks through the voice of a young Black girl named Lauren Olamina. Lauren has decided that her father’s Baptist faith, while useful in some ways, simply doesn’t speak to her experience anymore. She comes to create her own belief system called “Earthseed.” In one of the verses she argues,

“All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change...As wind, as water, as fire, as life, God is change.”

What if every time we read the word “blessed,” we substituted it for “Change.”

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, or those with physical infirmities or blind, and you will be changed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

If we believe that blessings are experiences that change us, then we might read this passage with a bit more clarity. What kind of people would we be if it were our instinct to have banquets where the vulnerable were the guests of honor?

It may mean that the building where the banquet is held has to be more than just ADA compliant. It may mean that we have to include COVID-friendly protocols, including testing and masking guidelines. Or that we have ASL interpreters. Or that the banquet is an at-home event where people get vouchers to order their own food that meets their dietary needs. Our world can be changed by the people we choose to put first.

Remember again in Mary’s protest song where she says that God has brought down the powerful from their thorns and lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

There is something powerful and world shaking about things being sent to their extreme opposite. You’re telling us, the hungry will be filled with good things? The rich will be sent away empty? Those who exalt themselves will be humbled? The humbled will be exalted? What kind of world is this?

It’s not just Jesus imagination that considers this sort of upside down world shaking. In 1971, Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer said, “But you see now, baby, whether you have a Ph.D, D.D. or no D, we’re in this bag together. And whether you’re from Morehouse or Nohouse, we’re still in this bag together.

Given the span of her work and the precision of her critique, we can rest assured that she was not flattening the experiences of people. Instead, she was naming the ways we are all connected.

Our outcomes are tied up together. Mary knew that you could not have the “hungry filled with good things” if the next line did not describe a universe where the rich were sent away empty. These two ideas depend upon each other. In order for the hungry to be filled with good things, the rich have to be sent away. In order for the exalted to be humbled, the humbled must be exalted. These are not separate ideas in distinct universes. They depend on each other to become true.

There are two ways to think about the current economic crisis. We can either wonder, “where are all the billionaires to help donate some funds?” or we can say, “the billionaires have their money because of mass theft and greed.”

The only way that Jeff Bezos, for example, can be rich is by distorting the word of God. Instead, the exalted are exalted. The humbled are humbled. The rich get richer. The poor get poorer. The hungry are sent away empty and the rich are filled with good things. This is not God’s economy!

Though Jesus seems to speak in riddles, it seems to be the only way to balance the equation of inequality. We cannot keep doing what we are doing and expect that justice shows up.

The humble are exalted, and the exalted shall be humbled.

This is the very rationale behind the Child Tax Credit. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, this policy provided many U.S. American families with monthly payments of up to \$300 per child. But eventually, the credit was allowed to expire due to government budgetary decisions. CDF’s President and CEO, Rev. Dr. Starkey Wilson lamented, “In the absence of monthly payments, which reached 61.3 million children in November, the unprecedented reduction in child poverty achieved by the Child Tax Credit in 2021 will evaporate. Nearly 100 million children are at risk of slipping back below the poverty line or deeper into poverty, with poverty rates projected to rise disproportionately for Black, Latino and Indigenous children. For these children and their parents, the loss of the Child Tax Credit means the loss of basic security and the peace of mind that comes with it.

Multiple studies have shown that the monthly payments made a major difference to reduce child poverty and hunger. But rather than make this policy permanent, we invested in war, weapons and destruction.

It seems like the scripture is being twisted again. The exalted shall be exalted. The humble shall be humbled.

Jesus is telling the group he is dining with and he’s telling us today, we should all think differently about where we sit or who we invite. This is not an invitation to one person at a time. All of us have a responsibility to think differently about our shared community.

Isn’t that what we are doing with our re-development? We could be putting high end condos at top dollar on our property which is prime real estate for downtown Detroit. But we are putting in Permanent Supportive Housing for those who struggle the most in this life and who need supportive services that will allow them to move in off the streets. They will have a place of their own, they will be safe, and secure and cared for. We don’t need any more stinking expensive places downtown! We need affordable housing and that is what this church is going to show this community.

In his book *Ordinary Radical Christian*, writer and activist Shane Claiborne says that more important than the church giving money to the poor, is the church getting to know the poor. He makes the case that true healing in the world will never happen unless we are in relationship. When we are in relationship with one another we know each other’s stories, and the love that comes from relationship sends us to care and to heal. Relationship can overcome rank and status.

In our story today, Jesus isn’t just being a tactless and shocking dinner guest. Instead, Jesus is giving us steps that will lead us toward healing and reconciliation.

Eat with people who have less than you. Sit with people you don’t know. Stay in relationship with the people that irritate you, remember you are all beloved. Jesus says, If you do these things, you will be blessed. If you do these things you will be changed. Amen.