

“The Heavenly Banquet”

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Luke 14: 1; 7-14

Recently the *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s largest national circulation newspaper, conducted a survey asking its readers what person, living or dead, would they most like to invite to a meal. The most frequent names listed included the Dalai Lama, Oprah Winfrey, hockey legend Wayne Gretzky (the readers were Canadian, after all). Coming in at #3 on the list was “Jesus/God.” At #2 was “good friends.” And the overwhelming choice at #1 was “a member of my family.”

These results surprised me at first. The respondents could have picked anyone in history to dine with and they chose the people they see every day. Why would they pick someone they already knew well, when they could feast with the famous, roll with royalty, schmooze a celebrity? But as I thought about it, these answers make some sense. The most enjoyable dinners I’ve been to have been with the people who know me the best and care about me the most. Where there is genuine fellowship rather than social competition. Though there can be plenty of that in families of course. And while Jesus only came in #3 on the *Globe and Mail* list, if you were going to dine at the Lord’s Table, you can be sure that the host knows and cares about you.

Last evening we had our congregational in home potluck dinners. Our family had a wonderful time in fellowship. I know that many of you here did too. So this morning, I’d like to invite you to an in home potluck dinner party with Jesus. A reading now from God’s Holy Word.

As recorded in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus was invited to dinner at a lead Pharisee’s home on the Sabbath. Frequently in Luke’s Gospel the Pharisees watched Jesus closely to see how he acted on the Sabbath. When he entered this dinner party, they were watching him again. But Jesus noticed the Pharisees too, particularly how competitive they were in trying to sit in the places of honor at the party.

So Jesus told them a parable about how at a banquet it’s unwise to try and be seated in the places of honor because you can only be disappointed if the host tells you to move. Much better to be humble and sit in a lesser seat so you might get pulled up to the higher one. On the surface it seems that Jesus is merely giving strategic advice. Providing help for competitive people to end up first by

pretending to be last. But the commentaries on Luke agree that Jesus' parable is about the virtue of true humility. The value of our humbling ourselves as Jesus did. It might lead somewhere, but the great thing about Christ-like humility is that it doesn't need to. Through Christ we have already arrived. In faith we affirm that our spiritual participation in our Lord's Supper here is but a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in God's kingdom.

And something else is going on here. Jesus is suggesting that life changes, we don't stay seated in the same place all our lives, and where we sit in life often determines our perspective on an issue. But God's love does not change. And that is worth being obedient to. What matters is not where we are seated in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, every seat is a great seat. So rather than obsessing about our status in relationship to others, we should focus on our obedience to God.

Yet this is challenging to us. I'm sure when the host of the dinner party heard Jesus tell his parable he was not thrilled that the evening began with an important guest complaining about the seating arrangements.

Truth be told, we might be uncomfortable hearing Jesus' advice as well. For in our own way, we each are competitive people. We live in a competitive city in a competitive society. Position matters, even seating position. At the Supreme Court and Senate, seating is by seniority. Networking guru Keith Ferrazzi advises in his bestselling book, "*Never Eat Alone*," that he tries to fly only first class wherever he goes in order to be seated next to the important people. Ferrazzi even gives tips for approaching the important people on planes - turn the flight into a dinner party by approaching your target during meals.

One of the issues for God's people since early Biblical times has been our desire to be in the places of honor or near power, particularly God's power. The root of the downfall of Adam and Even was a competitive pride to be as close to the power of God as possible. They ate the fruit and lost their freedom. The people of Babel built their tower to reach God and lost their speech. The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee in Matthew 20 was even less subtle and asked Jesus if they could be seated next to him, one at Christ's right hand and one at his left.

Why do we try so hard to go to God in power, when God is willing to come to us in humility through a baby and through the Holy Spirit? We all face the temptations of wanting to be seated in the places of honor in life. You know the

allures you face. It's ok to sit for a time, but if we aren't careful, like Icarus flying too close to the sun, we too can get so drawn in that we crash.

An institution of concentrated authority and too little accountability was the type of church Martin Luther faced at the start of the Protestant Reformation. The church had become too enamored with its own power, and not focused enough on the humility of Christ, so it was not willing to change or be an agent of change. But Luther and others made sure it did. On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his ideas for the renewal of the church in which he was a priest on a church door in Germany. And the Reformation began. The Reformation ideas about grace, faith and scripture still influence us greatly today. They even influence Charlie Brown. Each year on October 31 we watch the show "It's the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown." In it, Charlie Brown chides Linus for writing to a creature called the Great Pumpkin asking for Halloween presents. Linus shoots back, "Well you believe in a bearded man with a sleigh and reindeer who brings presents." Charlie Brown looks at the camera and says, "Clearly we are divided by denominational differences." The idea of being divided by denominational differences in Christianity comes from the Reformation. And each year on October 31 I think back to what happened on an October 31 500 years ago.

In her recent book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle quotes Rev. Mark Dyer who argues that every 500 years; the broader church goes through a Reformation. Dyer calls it a "rummage sale," where the practices, structures, and traditions of the church are reformed to make room for something new. Beginning with Jesus and the early church, every 500 years there has been a huge disruption, a major shift in the Christian Church: So in the year 500a.d. there were the fall of Rome and the emergence of the papacy; in 1000, the great schism between Eastern and Western Christianity; in 1500, the Protestant Reformation, which we remember this morning. One could argue that the building of Solomon's temple roughly 1000 years before Christ and the Babylonian exile roughly 500 years before Christ extend this trend backwards.

Dyer says that every 500 years a new form of Christianity emerges, that the dominant form of Christianity is reformed into a more open, better expression of it and that faith then spreads dramatically. He argues that issues of authority are presented in this analysis. In the 500's, authority was concentrated in the Pope. In the 1000's and 1100's, authority was split between East and West. In the Reformation time of "sola scriptura," the authority of scripture was lifted up. As we look to the spread of Pentecostalism throughout the world over the past century, particularly the emerging nations, we can see how the authority of the Holy Spirit is rising.

And now, roughly 500 years after the last Reformation, the structures of the broader church are changing. Leading denominations are facing troubles, from Catholic Church's scandals to the mainline Protestant membership losses to the Pew Research Center study last month revealing that 20% of Americans are atheists, agnostics or belong to no affiliated religious group.

In a post 9/11 world, at a time when globalization allows people to understand the ways humans experience the sacred like never before, the Western church continues to change. People increasingly say they are spiritual but not religious. Perhaps a rummage sale is occurring. We don't know what the new future will look like for our broader church. But something new is coming.

And yet it does not mean that everything must change. At Bradley Hills, we hold many traditions dear, especially as we approach Christmas, and there are lots of things in our building, our governance, our liturgy, our music, our polity, that we highly value. I do not think a rummage sale is occurring here. Our Founders Day in June honors our traditions. And because of our history we are growing with renewed energy into the future. As we do each quarter, we have another wonderful group of people joining our church this morning. There is much we should continue to take forward; and many things we take forward in new or creative ways. For in the face of all the changes of our time, the reality of God's love remains the same.

All Saints Sunday is a time we recognize our connection in love to the past, present and future. Since the seventh century, a day has been set aside in the Christian church for "the great cloud of witnesses who ran their race with perseverance and who now rest from their labors." On All Saints Sunday we commemorate what are called "balcony Christians," those who look down on us and watch over us. Who are here in spirit.

In the future, regardless of what changes occur, we know we are part of the broader shifts of history that came before and will continue after we become balcony Christians.

In the face of all changes, the same God who loved the saints of the past, loves us now. Our call is to interpret the change, find God in it, and to understand the Gospel faithfully in our time, not grieve about the past or worry about the future. Because the Holy Spirit is present in the present.

In a time of transformation, I hope we and the broader church takes heart of Jesus' message in our lesson this morning about humility around the table. That the church does best when it worries less about where everyone is sitting and spends more time focusing on having enough seats. One thing I value about Protestant churches and BHPC in particular that I do not find everywhere in Christendom is the inclusion of everyone at the communion table. We don't fence the table or church. No one is excluded here.

That the Spirit spreads most when we think less about the elements being consumed and more about the one who is our host. Last Friday we had screens put on some of the windows at the church. Always good to do some repairs in the off season. The man putting on our screens is part time pastor of a Mexican Pentecostal congregation. Part of the emerging diversity of Christianity in our area. We struck up a good conversation and this man was just on fire with his faith and grateful to be serving Christ even for part of his time through the church, that I was inspired.

That we are most like the body of Christ when we let our agendas go and focus on the big picture – that our church today is part of something much bigger than any of us. Saints were here in 1955 and 1900 and 500 and 2000 years ago and more, wrestling with some of the same questions we are today. If we are faithful to the Holy Spirit we will help ensure the church is here in another 500 years. We owe that to the saints who came before us, whom we honor with our love of Christ and each other, and in whose company we will be with someday at God's heavenly banquet.

And so as we try and shape what the church might become, let us be shaped by what God would have each of us become. The Pharisees in our lesson scrambled to sit in the places of honor in order to be noticed. Sitting with the stars can be fun, but it might just be that the place that is familiar is the nicest place to sit. It might be that the people who know you can be both a saint at times and a sinner, are the ones you should be dining with. And in a world where things too often change more rapidly than we can make sense of it, let us rest in the knowledge that we don't have to get caught up in the change. Our task is to remain focused on the love of God Christ has revealed to us, open to the Holy Spirit that is present with us and joyful that there is a place for each of us around the table at God's heavenly feast. Thanks be to God. Amen.