

Today, some of us are too busy for dinner parties and others of us don't even have a dining table to invite people to. Condo and home builders, at the behest of buyers, are squeezing out dedicated dining rooms in favor of larger bedrooms and walk-in closets. Dining is now relegated to the couch, or maybe a seat at a counter, if you're lucky. But we can't let our lack of a table, of perceived time, or even of a nice enough home, derail us from heeding Jesus' call to invite people in.

I don't know anyone who's hosted a dinner party quite like the one Jesus suggests, anyway. But I have known neighbors who were always sure to invite college students to their homes for Thanksgiving, especially exchange students who would otherwise have been alone on a quiet campus. I know people who used to set up a Christmas Day meal at a local restaurant each year. They invited church members and friends to join them, particularly those who had no family nearby or no one else to celebrate with. I know someone from this church who takes food to people without housing on the streets in Detroit—both leftover cookies from coffee hour, but also fresh baked muffins and cakes. I know a kid who created a lunch table at their school called the "Make A Friend" table, where you could sit to meet new people, but also where you could sit if you didn't otherwise have a place.

All those folks are humbly hosting meals where all God's children are invited. They are demonstrating that it doesn't matter your station in life. What matters is that each of us is claimed by God. Like Jesus did with his words and his actions, they are reminding us that if we are striving to position ourselves for better status, then our boat is way off course. We are instead called to use our energy to humbly transform everyday meals and interactions into places that reveal God's realm right in front of us.

Exaltation means elevating someone's status, but it can also mean a state of extreme happiness. At times when everyone is fed, when everyone is welcome, when there is no ranking of people's worth, then we may all be exalted. Then we can celebrate God's realm revealed on earth and our joy in being a part of it.

1 Emily Reynolds, "It's Not Curtains for You: The Latest Wealth Flex Is Showing Off Your Home's Interior," Robb Report, February 2, 2024, <https://robbreport.com/shelter/spaces/rich-americans-leave-curtains-open-1235497395/> See also Michael Water, "Why Rich People Don't Cover Their Windows," The Atlantic, January 22, 2024.

2 Carolyn J. Sharp, "Commentary on Luke 14:1;7-14," Working Preacher, August 28, 2022, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-luke-141-7-14-5>

August 31, 2025  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
"A Status Shake-up"  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Luke 7:1;7-14

When it gets dark in the evenings, I pull down the shades at my house. It keeps the glare of passing cars out of our living room. It maintains some privacy. But I read recently that there are a subset of people who prefer to leave their windows uncovered; no shades. This decision seems to be a symbol of status. Americans who make more than \$150,000 per year are more than twice as likely to leave their windows uncovered as people who make under \$30,000. The majority of people in all income brackets still have curtains of some kind and choose to draw them. But this tendency, particularly in urban areas, to let other people peer in your windows, to show to the furniture you have, the art on your walls is one that demonstrates high status and prestige. As one reporter writes, "The act of not drawing your curtains might seem risky and preposterous, but for wealthy homeowners, it signifies freedom, fearlessness, and a sign of financial stability."<sup>1</sup>

Our culture naturally functions differently than Jesus' did. We display wealth, honor, and status through the jobs we have, the places we travel, the homes we choose and apparently how we cover the windows in them, or don't. Sometimes, the act of jockeying for that position is not as pretty as the granite counter tops and high-end furnishings we can glimpse in our neighbors' windows. Trying to increase or maintain our status usually does not bring out the best or most faithful parts of us. In Jesus' day, displaying and vying for status especially happened at meals. Roman banquets in the home of a wealthy person were likely served at a U-shaped table. The shape theoretically provided equal access to the food and conversation, but around the table, some seats offered the highest honor and others, the lowest.<sup>2</sup> Jesus sat down at a meal on the Sabbath with some Pharisees. They watched him closely, just as Jesus watched how they approached the meal. What seats would they take? What was everyone trying to prove with their choices?

At the table, Jesus observed meal-goers trying to get that good, high-status seat right away. So Jesus gave some advice about their actions in the form of a story. He called it a parable, which usually tells us that its meaning was a little more complicated. Jesus said, "don't try to get that good seat first; instead, sit

at a lower seat and then see if you might be honored by being asked to move up to the better seat.” But that thinking is right in line with the prevailing goal of the culture: acquire a high status. And that’s not what you and I expect from Jesus who focused so much on the ‘least of these.’ But then Jesus said, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Those words point to a theme of Jesus’ ministry that with God, there are often reversals. The last shall be first, the lowly shall be lifted up, while the powerful are brought low. So his meaning in the parable seemed to be the pursuit of status in this life is all for nothing. As children of God, we are all exalted from our status as sinners to becoming the redeemed children of God! Any status we have comes from being God’s beloved, from receiving God’s grace. We can’t strive for it because we receive it all as a gift.

Those who exalt *themselves* are striving on their own for status in the world around us. As in, when we jockey and work hard for a good position, that’s us trying to earn status in comparison to the people around us. ‘I want to make enough money to take the same kind of vacations as Jane. I need to save enough to retire like Rob.’ But those who act with humility are able to see the kind of exaltation they have already been given. We notice the simple and wonderful gift of grace; of being counted among God’s faithful. This is the only status that counts in *God’s realm*. Our concern shouldn’t be with how we compare to other people, but only how our lives compare to Christ’s values: love of neighbor, giving of ourselves for others, sharing generously. What we have here—possessions, status, reputation—none of it matters a whit when it comes to God’s realm and rule. God intends to free us from all our striving for status and position. God envisions a banquet where we are all eating, talking, and being together, without any thought to who is who. And that does not mean we are waiting for some far away heaven to claim those things as prizes. God’s realm is already present among us. We can live in it right now when we train our eyes to see it and when we humbly choose to be part of it.

We were all devastated once again this week by the news out of Minneapolis and the shooting at the Catholic school there. I trust that you have prayed about it this week and together, we will pray today for all the people affected. It’s hard to summon fresh thoughts to respond to the tragedy beyond the continued gospel call to work toward peace and justice in all the ways we can, from more effective gun laws to more compassionate treatment of our neighbors, to working for a society that honors the dignity of all people. A year or so ago, after an all-too-similar incident, a pastor colleague reached out online to social media a clergy group I’m in. She was understandably upset and grieved for what was in the news then, just as we are now. So during her sermon that Sunday, she went off script. As she declared God’s love in the midst of pain and violence, she boldly said that there was no reason anyone should own an assault rifle. The next morning, she received an email

from a member of her congregation who is an avid hunter. He joined in her abhorrence of the recent violence. He also shared with her that he is a hunting instructor. The kind of weapons he prefers to teach people with are technically considered assault rifles. And he explained that he prefers to teach with them because there is less recoil to manage for someone who is just learning. He was not angry in his note; he was not exalting his own position. He wanted his pastor to know more about his own experience.

When she received his note, the pastor reached out to our group seeking ideas on how to respond. Should she just thank him for the information? Should she apologize for mis-speaking? She acknowledged that the man had come to her with some degree of humility. His note was gentle and his posture toward her was kind. When I read her question I thought that there was a small blessing in the middle of so much heartache. This congregant had approached her directly. What a novelty that he sought a loving and calm discussion about a topic that is so important and yet almost impossible to discuss among people with different ideas. So I, and a number of other pastors, suggested she reach out to the man; see if they could meet and talk further. Doing that required the pastor to swallow some pride and approach him in humility. But that was what she decided to do. She updated us later saying, “I emailed him. Explained that I was grateful for the knowledge he shared and said I would love to further the conversation over lunch. I also apologized for mis-speaking on something I felt passionate about but had no knowledge of. And [now] we have lunch scheduled for next week!”

By God’s grace, these two were freed from striving for the prestige of being right, of vying for position. They humbled themselves so that they could talk and listen to each other, even as I doubt they came to agreement. Their exchange could not change the deaths that occurred or the wider cycle of violence. Yet their humility led to the joy of a deepening relationship and a stronger connection. And that conversation was going to happen at the *lunch table*. Which I suspect, that day, was transformed into a holy banquet table with God as their host. Their humility led to exaltation, not in status, but in faithfulness.

At the Pharisee’s home, Jesus urged his listeners that day to use their own tables not as a place to seek status, but as a place to give it up. To erase the meaning of it. To expose how status and prestige, bestowed by the fleeting qualities of health or wealth, have no bearing on God’s calls to faith, justice, and wholeness. “Invite to your table the poor and the people who are struggling,” he said. Make it clear that what matters is not whether you sit at the head of the table or the end of it. Because what’s more important is that other people just get a seat; that they get to eat at all. And that helps us remember that everyone’s dignity, all our belovedness and worth is *given* by God, never earned through our striving or our good luck.