

# Sermon

August 28, 2016 | The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14 | Preacher: Roger Ferlo

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One of my several secret pleasures is an addiction to cable shows that feature tours of stately mansions and keen insights into the lives of the superrich. Several years ago there was a series called simply "The Aristocracy". I remember vividly the week that featured an absurdly noble and absurdly wealthy entrepreneur living somewhere in Bavaria who bore the fabulous name of the Count von Thurm und Taxis.

After being taken on a breathless tour of the estates and the factories and the family chapels, you are introduced to the Count himself, as well as his various hangers-on, including his very young and reputedly high-born Hungarian wife. When asked how it felt to be so rich, she insisted with winsome charm that she and the count couldn't be all that rich because they seldom thought about money at all, and never talked about it. Which just shows you.

The highlight of the show was a report on a dinner party the count had planned for a clutch of visiting nobility, all of them tanned and fit and fresh from Cannes or the Azores or wherever such people get tanned and fit and fresh. The dinner took place in a hall twice the size of the East Room in the White House, but at a table lavishly set for only twelve guests. We watch them arrive, looking very elegant and nonchalant, at least until they get to the entrance to banquet hall.

Suddenly things get very intense. The head butler meets the crowd at the door, and he's holding what looks like a menu painted on a carving board--the kind of thing you'd expect to find at the House of Pancakes, but not at the palace of Von Thurm und Taxis. It turns out it's not a menu he's holding, but a seating chart, with little movable name cards in two little rows all ready to be adjusted in case some duke should arrive unexpectedly from the Alps and have to displace a lowly earl (or vice versa--I can never keep the order straight).

Everybody got really quiet when they saw the butler: eyes narrowed, attention focused, conversations ended. This after all was what made it all matter. Who sat where was a sign of who was who, no matter how much money you had or how little you thought about it as you spent it or made it. Dinner with the Count and Countess von Thurm und Taxis is not about food--it's about rank, and privilege, and keeping everyone in their proper

place. Which is the point, I guess, of being the Count of von Thurm und Taxis.

So here's Jesus this morning, at a similar dinner party. Jesus, the carpenter's son, advocate for the poor and the homeless, the subversive rabble-rouser from Galilee. There he is at the home of a Pharisee, and he's sold out--hobnobbing with the privileged and their fancy guests, offering shrewd advice on how to consolidate their position in the social scale:

When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, "Give place to this man," and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, "Friend, go up higher."

You have to admit, this is shrewd as a social strategy, albeit wildly self-serving. You take the lowest place in order to cut your losses. Humility is a ploy to make you look even better once you end up where you know you deserve to be--at the top of the heap.

However you slice it, this passage is distressing. You wonder what in the world prompted Luke to include it in his story. Surely Jesus couldn't mean this. Surely he detested the way the Pharisees and the ruling classes went about their business. Surely he was not a believer in rank and order. Surely he was at the Pharisee's banquet only to break it up, the way he's break up the tables of the money changers in the Temple. You don't eat with your enemies, and you don't play their game.

But I prefer to think that Luke knew what he was doing, as did Jesus. For one thing, Jesus didn't seem to care who he ate with. Giving advice about finding their place at table, Jesus didn't so much reject the principle of order and place and appropriate behavior as recognize it for what it was, and in so doing he turned order and place and behavior upside down--showing the exalted how to be humble, and the humble how to be exalted. Even if it meant Jesus beating the privileged people at their own game, sitting at table with them, challenging them by his very

presence and sympathy and shrewd understanding not only of who they were but of who they might have the grace to become.

Let's face it, in welcoming Jesus to his house, the Pharisee in Luke's story was welcoming a dangerous stranger. Perhaps unintentionally, the host acted the way Jesus challenges all of us to act: he embraced the outsider and troublemaker, fed him, sat with him, listened to him. The Pharisee who threw that party was closer to the Kingdom than he at first could realize:

Jesus said to the man who invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

Jesus has raised the stakes. When he talks about banquets, he is not talking about social position and moments of hierarchical one-upmanship. When Jesus shares a meal, he shares a Kingdom. He gives away his sovereignty. It's a way of ruling that is instead a way of giving, a way of giving that expects nothing and stakes everything. What today's Collect calls "true religion" is to embrace not just the friend but also the stranger—the outsider, the ostracized, the shunned, the maimed, the rejected—and to do so expecting no recompense. Recompense implies that what you offer the stranger is yours exclusively to give, and owed back to you somehow. But in Jesus' upside-down world, love is not a commodity to be traded or hoarded. Love is not a zero-sum game. It's not something you measure. Everything we have is a gift, no one has a monopoly on love, no one deserves it, God gives it freely, no one hoards it, and no one can ever give or be given enough. What we know is that the gift is endless.

Long ago in New York, I worked briefly in a tenement that some Franciscan sisters had transformed into what they called The Dwelling Place for what we used to call bag ladies. Bag ladies were the lowest of the low: wandering the city, sleeping in doorways and over grates, much more vulnerable than their male counterparts on the streets. You never knew when you greeted one of them as a guest at the door whether she might be the next one murdered where she slept. They came, all of them, lining up every day at 4pm for the meal they would get at 5.

You got used to seeing this in New York in the late seventies and early eighties—soup kitchen lines and pantry lines, empty faces,

the smell. But the Dwelling Place was different. Once the women got past the volunteer at the door (not all of them did—some of them, not many, had a record of violence), once they had checked their precious shopping bags (full of rags and newspapers and dog-eared government letters and hospital discharge forms), the nuns treated them like guests—like "ladies", they said. And in response, the formal dignity with which the "ladies" received such love—even in their craziness and paranoia and depression and loneliness—would have been almost comical if it weren't so moving.

This wasn't your typical soup kitchen. There was no big pot of soup, no long line to stand in, no harried anonymous servers. The ladies sat at tables set out with paper placemats and steaming cups of tea, and we volunteers served them at table. Some of them would stare right through you, some of them would start telling you about their children or nephews or nieces long since lost or deserted; one lady would ceremoniously remove her immaculate white gloves (God knows how she kept them clean) and comport herself with an exaggerated elegance that would have put the Countess von Thurm und Taxis to shame.

It was a bit like comic opera. But so is most of life, when it's not high tragedy. In that job I had my first taste of what Jesus envisioned as the Kingdom. None of us at the Dwelling Place harbored any illusions, including the ladies, even the craziest ones. Manhattan was a brutal place. Still is. None of us there—nuns, volunteers, the ladies themselves—had any pretension of being anyone more than who we were, or doing anything more than we were doing. Yet there we were, tending to a branch of the Kingdom on Tenth Avenue near the Port Authority overpass. There we were, possessed of a sense of unity, however fleeting, and a sense of God's love, however fragile, and a sense of human solidarity, however threatened. Those ladies would likely never repay those nuns. One of them wouldn't even survive until the next day. Nor was there any real likelihood of the nuns' "rescuing" any of them. The city was too brutal, the red tape too entangling, the problem too vast, the isolation too deep. The nuns were pretty matter-of-fact about it all. Their task was to do as they could, to love as they could, hard as it sometimes was, and to recognize that Jesus was every day in their midst.

The Kingdom of God is breaking in among us, Luke's Jesus tells us time and again. It has its own peculiar ceremonies, its own peculiar order. Once in a while, thank God, we are given a glimpse.