

## LELC Pentecost 12

What a strange text it seems we have today. The second part makes sense, or least sounds more like what we would expect Jesus to say. But that whole first part, is Jesus telling people how to scam the banquet seating scene? Really? Well, to make sense of this Gospel lesson it helps to have a little background about the social workings of the world Jesus lived in.

In Jesus' day, the social system was what is called a patronage. In a patronage, the not-so-powerful are always currying favor with the powerful. The powerful ones (usually also rich) can grant favors and make connections, like giving you business. They can take your side in legal disputes and generally make your life a little easier or more lucrative. In return the less-powerful are expected to be loyal, to make the "patron" look good, and to "cooperate" if ever the powerful one needed you to do something or take care of something.

This more-power/less-power dynamic functioned at all kinds of levels, where the ones in the middle might have both patrons that they tried to please and impress, and clients who tried to please and impress them. And in any given region the biggest, badest, richest, most powerful dude might have been called "El Patron, the Father" If you are thinking this sounds like the Mafia and the Godfather, you are not wrong.

*like our pharisee* So, in that world dinners and wedding banquets became occasions not just to celebrate, but to demonstrate and reinforce, maybe even exploit or manipulate one's social standing in that patronage system. If you know even a little bit about human nature you can pretty easily begin to imagine the how this worked. Dudes in the middle would invite the ones more powerful than they were to honor them, and maybe to gain a favor. And they would invite the less powerful one to show off how powerful and important they were.

And since ancient art suggests that people ate while reclining at low tables instead of at banquet tables with neatly printed name placards it doesn't take much to imagine the scene unfolding. Life happens from one season to the next so one day the one who was powerful might lose a son so they are down a notch. Someone else might have had a very successful business venture, up a notch. There would have been a certain amount of gamesmanship going on since the goal was to sit as high, as close to the center of honor, as you dare.... But not so high that you got called out and asked to move aside. You can also just see it play out, when some guy realizes he overestimated himself and had to hurry out to "go check on his donkey."

Maybe it is most like things like political fund-raisers or corporation shindigs where people are trying to be seen, make an impression, score some points, solidify some alliances, all for the purpose of getting ahead, currying favor, just “doing business.”

It is into that context that Jesus offers his advice about going to and giving banquets. First things first, going to a banquet: go to the lowest place, Jesus says, the host may ask you to come up higher. Notice that is a “may.” This isn’t manipulation. This is risking spending the whole dinner in the lowest place. What is Jesus saying here? I think he is saying, “Don’t play the game.” He is giving his followers a pro-tip on subverting the ways of the world. The game doesn’t work if not everyone will play it. You can subvert the system that tells some people they matter more and others that they matter less if you just stop playing their “who matters most?” games. In Jesus’ day, at a banquet, that would look like taking the lowest place. Kind of makes you wonder what would best subvert the system these days.

Piece of advice number two: Jesus said to the host (who you might remember is a Pharisee) when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. A) that probably means that none of those folks were invited to this particular banquet; probably the host had invited the usual cast of as rich and powerful folks as the Pharisee thought he could get to come to his party. And B) it kind of makes you wonder why the Pharisee invited Jesus – was he really interested in what Jesus was teaching and preaching, or was he trying to impress folks or curry a favor from Jesus?

The real audience for that comment was all the folks listening on who would be the next ones to host a banquet. And they probably all thought to themselves, “What, are you crazy, Jesus?!” You can’t just stop being in the world, can you? What good would it do to invite all the poor and powerless? Nothing – except that it would further subvert a system where some people were rich and powerful and had everything and others were poor and powerless and had nothing. Treating the poor and powerless like they are somebody who really matters still subverts the system of favor and loyalty that keeps the poor poor and the rich rich. That’s why the arrogant rich and powerful get so bent out of shape about it.

Black Lives Matter }  
Water in desert } Backlash  
Women in office }  
o  
Persist

I want to say a little something about humility and humbleness in these texts today. We should never confuse humility with weakness. Because nothing could be further the truth. The kind of humbleness of heart that is talked about in these texts is actually strength. It takes strength to be yourself and to not buy into the world’s system and way of doing things. People who are all bluster and putting others down

just to make themselves look good are the weakest of weaklings. True, freely chosen, humility is a strength of character, it is the strength that is strong enough to risk other people's negative opinions, strong enough to risk loss of social status, strong enough to be generous and kind and hospitable – without expectation of being “paid back.”

Hosting a banquet and inviting all of society's outcasts and forgotten ones instead of the ones who could pay you back somehow is exactly how God would do it. It is exactly how God does it!! God has invited all of us to the banquet that is life itself lived out on this good earth. The delights of creations, the joy of relationship, the sublime peace of connected-ness to all that is. What a banquet set for us, for all. We practice attending that banquet every time we come here, to this table, to share the feast of the bread of life, and the cup of salvation. There is no place of honor here. All come, all share. There is enough for all.

Beware seeing  
/ we bid so much  
longer see the good.

So I hope today when you come to this table, you will remember that God has invited you, made a place here just for you, just as you are – maybe today you'll be coming poor in body or spirit, maybe you are limping along in life as best you can, maybe you are just plain unable to see right now all that God is doing in your life. Even so, God bids you come. Be filled. Be fed. Be renewed in strength for whatever lies ahead.

Not because rich, powerful, virtuous

The hymn we are going to sing next is “Let Us Go Now to the Banquet” and it is in your bulletin in English. But the refrain has one of those translations that loses something so I want to invite us to sing the refrains in Spanish.

Vamos todos al banquete, a la mesa de la creación...

Go, all of us to the banquet, to the table of creation...

Cada cual con su taburete tiene un puesto y una misión.

Each one with a place to sit, having a place and a mission.

Let us sing this song and hold in our hearts all people, both the one who are poor and powerless and at the mercy of the “El Patrons” of the world, and those who are rich and powerful but who are empty of love or compassion, morality or integrity. And then let us come to the banquet, this feast of God's love, and be strengthened to live out God's ways enough to subvert the ways of the world. Amen.

until all our banquets are  
banquets for all.  
Amen