

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

I'm going to take a moment to set the stage for what we heard this morning. Maybe you've heard it 100 times before, maybe this is the first time you've heard it, but I want to make sure we understand what's happening around this reading so that we can understand what Jesus is doing with those who are gathered around the table.

This particular segment of Luke's story of Jesus began with him healing a woman on the Sabbath. If you were here last week, that's the story we heard, the story of a woman who could finally stand up after 18 years. And the religious authorities were annoyed with Jesus because he had violated their interpretation of Sabbath law.

Then Jesus goes on to tell a couple of parables about the Kingdom of God and some teaching about how hard it is to get into the Kingdom for those who put themselves first, ending with “³⁰ Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

That's followed by Jesus predicting his passion. He talks about his upcoming suffering and execution in response to some Pharisees expressing concern about what he's saying and warning him that Herod wants to kill him. It's important to recognize that there isn't this constant disagreement or conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus. It's not like the Pharisees are always wrong or always bad. Especially in Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees are more of a conversation partner, engaging with Jesus on what matters to them and what Jesus is doing as a first century Jew.

And that brings us to the part of the story we just heard. Jesus is in the house of a Pharisaic leader – certainly not a setting that is inherently antagonistic. Jesus is a guest...seemingly, but the Pharisees are watching him closely.

Maybe they're hoping for a glimpse of the kingdom, the kingdom that Jesus just described, the kingdom they'll ask him about later in Luke's Gospel. But for this moment, the Pharisees are waiting to see what happens next. And what happens is Jesus heals on the Sabbath...again. We didn't hear that this morning. You may have noticed that we skipped a few verses. We skipped over the story of a man being healed of edema – of fluid building up. The lectionary probably skips it because we just heard about a Sabbath healing last week, but we can't ignore that it happens here too. Right in the middle of this fancy dinner, Jesus once again revisits Sabbath law and emphasizes the care of one in need over the prohibition of work.

And then Jesus talks to this gathering of leaders, a gathering of honored guests about what it really means to sit around a table together.

When I was deployed to Djibouti in 2013, I had the opportunity to go to Naples, Italy for some required training. Gathered for that training were chaplains and enlisted assistants from all over Europe, Southwest Asia, and Africa. There were probably about 40-50 of us, and because I was the senior chaplain from Djibouti (even though I was still a very junior chaplain), I was included in the invitation to go to dinner with the Deputy Chief of Chaplains, Rear Admiral Margaret Kibben...4 ranks higher than me.

I'm not sure I wanted to go to the dinner. It was a bunch of senior chaplains I didn't know, I had to get a ride with one of them because I didn't have a car. It wasn't a sought-after invitation, but it was also an invitation I couldn't refuse.

The dinner itself was amazing. We went to the Villa Elvira in Pozzuoli, which is the coast where Paul supposedly landed when he sailed to Rome. The restaurant was built over a catacomb, complete with a glass floor so that as we sat at the table, we looked down into the (thankfully empty) burial chambers. After dinner, we were given a tour and saw the mosaics that dated back to the earliest days of the Christian movement spreading across the Roman Empire.

But back to dinner...here I was with this gathering of chaplains, almost all of whom outranked me; almost all of whom, at least on some levels, were trying to make a good impression on the Admiral, who would soon become the Chief of Chaplains and pick up a second star. That's how it worked, so everyone knew she was soon going to be our most senior chaplain boss.

I won't say I was immune to the politics in the room, because I wasn't. I was trying to figure out who these mostly senior chaplains were and how knowing them might affect my career down the line.

Because, obviously, that's a big part of life in the military. It's **all** about rank and authority when it comes to having a say in your work as an officer. Even when it's not supposed to be, it's still about rank and privilege. You have to build relationships with others so that you can accomplish what you want or need to accomplish in your career. Even when you're doing it for the right reasons, you have to play the game of power and prestige to get some things done.

Of course, it's never like that outside the military. (That was sarcasm...in case you didn't recognize it)

Jesus offers some strong words about humility and places of honor. It's critical for understanding his point to recognize that the setting of his words *is a place of power*... "the

house of a leader of the Pharisees.” He’s speaking to those who are used to being given places of honor, of being shown respect, of being afforded courtesy and deference. He’s challenging their understanding of power and prestige.

Because, very likely, the religious institution of the day had taken on the traits of the secular world around them. The Roman Empire was built on the concept of privilege. You earned it through your extraordinary accomplishments, or, as was much more likely, you were given it by those who had some to spare. Someone who was honored in the community could offer you honor for whatever reason they chose.

They could act as your patron, because offering your patronage to someone of lower rank was also a way to build your own prestige. Lifting someone up meant they owed you a favor. The entire social order was built on this concept. If you brought honor to someone who had more privilege, they would reward you. If you brought shame to someone with power, you were in trouble.

I look back to that dinner in Italy and how careful I was in what I said and how I acted. I knew that if I spoke out of turn or said something the wrong way, it could cost me a lot. The Pharisees gathered at that banquet with Jesus were clearly concerned about what everyone else would think about them as they jostled for the best seat their honor would give them.

But Jesus wasn’t simply offering social etiquette classes. He wasn’t reinforcing the honor and shame dynamic established in the empire, because he goes on to tell the host that his banquet shouldn’t be about power and privilege at all. The guests invited should be those who have nothing to offer in return...the poor, the lame, and the blind, the least important members of the community should be the honored guests. Not those who have something to offer in return.

Luke’s Gospel comes back to this point over and over again, it’s around the table that we glimpse the kingdom, because it is around the table that we build community. It’s around the table that we include people in the reality of God’s love. It’s around the table that the power of this world has no claim on us, but the love of God brings us together as beloved children of equal privilege.

The kingdom of God stands opposed to the system of the Roman Empire. It stands opposed to the military hierarchy in which we function. It stands opposed to societal pressure to be part of the “in crowd.” It is something new that God has created for each one of us. The world tries to hold onto power and privilege, and God says there is another

way to gather around the table. So, it begs the question...who are you going to invite?
Amen.