



August 27/28/29, 2022

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: **God's Throwing a Party and You're Included**

1. So Find Your Spot 2. Return the Favor

Sermon Text: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹² Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

In the name of the Savior God who loved us that we might love one another, my dear Christian friends,

I don't think it's a closely guarded secret. And I freely admit it. I like to go to parties. Maybe you do too. I like mixing with people, meeting new folks and catching up with friends. But, sometimes doesn't it seem like there are so many events and parties, it's hard to keep up? I mean, almost every weekend there's somebody's birthday, kids' event, church activity, New Ulm festival or concert. Now all of these are gifts from God. But, does it ever seem like there are too many and you can't be at two places at once. So how do YOU decide which party to go to? Usually, it comes down to who asked first, how well you know the person, or did they come to your last party.

But, not everyone's calendar is so full. In case you didn't realize it, there are some extremely lonely people out there. They're just hoping, praying that the phone will ring, but the invitation NEVER comes. If ONLY we were THAT starved for GOD'S attention. IF ONLY we realized how blessed we are to be gathered in God's house, to once again hear the Gospel news that God has included us in His family of believers and has promised us a heavenly home. On the basis of Luke, chapter 14, we'll hear this amazing truth: **God's Throwing a Party and You're Included. Like all good party etiquette**, first of all find your spot. And don't forget to return the favor.

Read through the Gospels, and it seems like Jesus often received party invitations that He attended. He attended parties at the homes of the rich and famous like the Pharisees in our sermon reading today. He got together with friends like Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. And Jesus even attended parties with scandalous personalities like Zaccheaus the tax collector or the lady simply known as the “sinful woman”. It’s not like He had gobs of time on His almighty hands – He only had THREE years to wrap up His earthly ministry, three years to save the world from sin and share the Gospel message.. So the clock was ticking ...

The unnamed Pharisee in Luke’s Gospel probably thought he was doing Jesus a favor. Listen to the details of this dinner party as our sermon reading begins: ***One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.*** Not only was Jesus getting a free meal, this was a “prominent” Pharisee – a real Jewish mover and shaker. We’d make time in our busy schedules for important people like this, right? But, it was all a set-up. The other guests, who also happen to be Pharisees were just waiting for Jesus to slip up and say something dumb. As God’s Son, Jesus knew He was walking into a trap, and yet He still confidently walked into that party.

Jesus watched the guests as they arrived and was HE ever disappointed. You know what a “pecking order” is, right? A pecking order isn’t just reserved for chickens in a barnyard. Like it or not, there’s a pecking order on our school playgrounds, in our families, and yes, even in our community. Who is most important and who is least important, and who gets their way? The Pharisees had a pecking order all right. In our reading, they showed it by wanting to sit as close to the host as possible.

I think you already know this: pecking orders are meaningless to God. And they should matter that little to us. Jesus tells us how to find our spot in God’s party. Our reading continues: ⁷ ***When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable:*** ⁸ ***“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.*** Translation: don’t think of yourself higher than you ought. Whether you are in the community or in a family, Jesus says consider others more important than yourselves and look for ways to value them and put them first. And that’s hard. That’s hard because people overestimate their value. Okay, WE overestimate our value. It’s like there’s this unspoken point system we live by. It’s where you get more points for a six-figured income than minimum wage. You get more points for driving an Escalade than for driving a rust-bucket. You get more points if you made the team, choir, or squad than if you didn’t. And after you add up all these mythical points, you know where you stand. But, that’s not how it works in God’s kingdom. God alone determines our value and that’s a Biblical fact. Let me give you a real world example. At the last wedding reception you’ve attended, who sat at the head-table? Not the richest guest, not even the parents of the bride and groom, but the closest friends of the couple. I suppose they earned the right to be there.

By what we've done for God and left undone, where do we deserve to be in God's kingdom? Where should we find our spot? If we put our lives under the microscope of God's Word, we haven't lived up to God's holy or perfect standards. We deserve to be far FAR away from God's party here on earth and in eternity, where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yet, in spite of all those times we considered ourselves more important than we should've, Jesus calls sinners like us, "His friends." Jesus said: **Greater love has no one than this, than He lay down His life for His friends (John 15:13).** Jesus showed how much we mean to Him. He did more for us than just seat us at a head table for a meal. He stretched out His beaten body on the cross and paid our debt of sin in full so that we will be at the wedding feast of heaven for all eternity. Jesus wasn't a snob. He didn't say to Himself: "I'm better than these people" – even though He was the one person who really could say that. He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross.

So then, what difference does it make what others think about us when we closely follow Christ? We don't have to prove we are BETTER than others. As Christians, we are NOT BETTER – by God's grace, we are simply forgiven in full – and that means everything. That fact changes us. We don't have to get angry at those who make fun of our Christian faith or even make our lives exceedingly difficult. Remember what Jesus says: **¹¹For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.** That's God's promise and that's a future tense. In the future, God will overturn every pecking order, sooner than we think. And that should put every one of us on notice. Remember, that's God's job to judge and make things right and not ours.

So remember the main point of our sermon reading, **God's Throwing a Party and You're Included.** So find your spot, the spot of humility, and secondly return the favor. When someone invites us to their party, we feel obligated to show our appreciation. That's just good manners. We might send our host a thank-you note or a text or maybe even invite them to one of our parties. I have to admit with my head held low, others have done more for me than I have ever done for them. Now, maybe you feel the opposite, maybe you keep on doing things for others and they just take advantage of you.

So let's take a step back. Let's look at it from God's perspective. God has done so much for us: given us our eyes, ears, and all our senses. He gives us food to eat and a roof over our head. He gives us our schools, air conditioning, family, friends, and lets us live in the greatest country of the world. And He gives us his mercy, His grace, and His eternal salvation. Understand this, my Christian friends, we CAN'T ever repay God for the sacrifice of His Son Jesus so we could attend the ultimate party of heaven. But, in our reading today, Jesus shows us a very real way, how we can gratefully return the favor – by the way we treat others. Jesus said it best: **Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40).**

In the final words of our reading, Jesus told his host not only to be kind to people who could pay him back. Why not? Because of selfish motives: "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." What's sleazier: a politician who rewards a large campaign donor with rich government

contracts or a husband who buys his wife flowers only so she'll let him go fishing with his buddies? C'mon be honest -- how many of our "acts of kindness" are really self-serving? God knows and we do too.

Instead, in this final section of Scripture, Jesus clearly tells us whom we are to serve: the poor, the crippled, and the blind. In other words serve those who can do NOTHING in return just like God serves us. When we put aside our pride, we won't feel taken advantage of. I think of all the St. Paul's volunteers we have: the lady who works in the new Narthex humbly serving donuts. The quiet usher who greeted you today at the door. The lady who will take your picture because she wants to help her church. All these people serve us each and every week and they don't get paid for it and they usually don't get thanked. I think they get it. They do it for Christ. And now, I hope you do too.

Maybe we can join them. Maybe we can volunteer helping in the Sunday Childcare or Sunday School so that more souls can learn more about Jesus? Just look in your bulletins each week. There's something for every one. Even though we're in His debt forever, God doesn't expect us to repay Him. He says return the favor by serving others as He has served us. We can spend just some of our time this week offering a helping hand, patiently listening to a conversation when we're not feeling up to it, or offering a smile to someone who won't pay you back. Maybe even go BIG and do it twice.

So let's go to our parties. Let's have a good time and be intentionally helpful to each person who attends. But, especially remember that Christian are Christ to our neighbor. As Jesus said: ***Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*** And THAT reward of Grace will come sooner than we think. God's Throwing a Party and We're Included. Don't miss out. Amen.