

Luke 14:1, 7-14

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Years ago, a church I served developed a clever evening of fellowship called “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” The idea was that a family in the church would agree to host a meal for a certain number of people from the church, but they wouldn’t know who would be dining with them until their dinner guests showed up at the door.

Now that may sound a little risky, but the reality is this was a church small enough that nearly everyone knew each other, so even though the people in charge worked hard to put together parties of people who didn’t know each other all that well, the reality was, it was a mostly low-risk evening.

There were no total strangers showing up on anyone’s doorstep expecting to be fed.

In this episode from the gospel of Luke, when Jesus is invited to a dinner party hosted by a religious leader, it appears that, although he is no stranger to them, they are still trying to figure out who he is and what he is all about — which is why they are watching him closely.

And Jesus does not disappoint.

Right after he arrives, he encounters a man with dropsy
(an illness that causes severe swelling) and he heals him,
even though it's the Sabbath and,
according to strict interpretation of Jewish law,
healing on the Sabbath is forbidden.

Then Jesus sits down at the table and immediately chastises everyone there
for their focus on honor and status.

“When you throw a party,” he tells them,
“Don't just invite your friends and relatives
and rich people. Invite the poor, the blind
and the crippled –people you don't know,
people you usually avoid,
people who can't ever return the favor.”

With these words, Jesus offers a radical critique of the social and political
practices of that time and place.

The Ancient Near East was a culture predicated on honor and shame,
and this meant every move people made was calculated
to increase their honor and decrease their shame.

This was especially true about dinner parties.

Who you invited and who got to sit where were big deals,
and these details dictated the guest list and

the seating chart of the next party.

Everything was quid pro quo and pay to play.

Every interaction was calculated to provide maximum reputational benefit.

With his recommendations, Jesus is suggesting that,

instead of playing by the usual rules of privilege and status and honor,

his dinner companions try something unusual, even radical:

go outside the circle of influence and patronage

by inviting people who can never return the favor,

who could never – at least by cultural standards –

adequately express their gratitude.

In her book *Gratitude*, Diana Butler Bass explains how ancient Rome

was structured politically like a pyramid, with the emperor on top.

Everything good flowed from the emperor,

and by the time it reached the masses at the bottom,

there wasn't much left.

Gifts, mostly in the form of economic benefits, flowed down and gratitude

– both in the form of appreciation but more often as

financial debts like taxes, flowed up.

Bass observes the structures of the ancient Roman Empire

still haunt Western societies today, especially in relation to gratitude.

Although democracy was initially meant to offer a fair,

more equitable alternative to systems of patronage and feudalism, as commercial interests overtook democratic ideals, gratitude mutated. Just think about how our politicians are beholden to lobbyists and political action committees that give them the money they need to run their campaigns.

Corporations and PACS give politicians money, and the politicians are then much more likely to vote for the policies those groups want – which is one reason the NRA has been so successful in preventing meaningful gun control legislation despite the majority of Americans being in favor of reform.

Although we may not always think of it that way,

this exchange of money for votes is a form of gratitude.

Our country's founders may have hoped to create a society that operated differently, but sin is persistent, and we have ended up with yet another pyramid culture in which power and money are concentrated at the very top.

Which is why this story Jesus tells is still relevant today.

In it, Jesus suggests a radical restructuring of the political and social order by calling us to do more than just exchange favors with those who can offer us

something of equal value or greater.

Jesus tells us to reach out to those who have been
pushed to the margins, those we **think** could never
return the favor.

When we do, Jesus suggests, we imitate God, who, in every moment,
extends the benefit of totally undeserved mercy and love
to every single one of us.

This is an act of compassion that none of us can repay,
except by paying it forward.

Jarrett Krosoczka is a children's author and illustrator.

When his first book was published, he went back to his elementary school
to make a presentation. While he was there he ran into to someone
he instantly recognized, and who immediately recognized him.

It wasn't the principal or a favorite teacher.

It was Jeannie, the lunch lady.

As he and Jeannie talked, she mentioned her grandkids.

"That blew my mind," Jarrett says. "My lunch lady had grandkids,
and therefore kids, and therefore left school at the end of the day?"

I thought she lived in the cafeteria with the serving spoons.

I had never thought about any of that before."

This conversation was the inspiration for Jarrett’s Lunch Lady graphic novel series,

about lunch ladies who use fish stick nunchucks to fight

evil cyborg substitutes, a school bus monster, and mutant athletes.

At the end of every book, they capture the bad guy in a hairnet

and proclaim, “Justice is served.”

Jarrett had no idea how much kids would love this series,

and how it would transform the relationship between kids and lunchroom

workers in schools across the country. Again and again,

Jarrett heard the same thing from lunch ladies.

First, they told him that they weren’t used

to being treated kindly in popular culture.

Second, they said, “Thank you.

Thank you for making a superhero in our likeness.”

This feedback inspired Jarrett to create School Lunch Hero Day,

when kids can make projects for their lunch staff.

On this day incredible stories have been celebrated —

the lunch lady in California who keeps an eye on the kids as they

come through the line and reports back

to the guidance counselor when something seems amiss;

the lunch ladies in Kentucky who realized that 67 percent

of their students went without food in the summer and retrofitted a school bus to create a mobile feeding unit which feeds 500 kids a day when school is out of session.

The other thing that happened is that, when given the chance to thank their lunch staff, kids did this in amazingly creative ways: hamburger cards made out of construction paper, flowers in milk carton vases, paper pizzas on which every kid signed a different topping.

One lunch lady said to Jarrett,

“Before this day, I felt like I was at the end of the planet at this school. I didn’t think anyone noticed us down here.”

Another said, “You know, what I got out of this is that what I do is important.”

What Jarrett has learned from all of this is the importance of saying thank you. “A thank you can change a life,” he says.

“It changes the life of the person who receives it, and it changes the life of the person who [gives] it.”

Jesus calls us to reach beyond our circles not just for the sake of others, but for our sake as well.

For it is not just receiving grace that transforms us, true transformation happens when we extend grace with

no expectation of anything in return.

In an editorial in *The Christian Century*, editor Peter Marty wrote,

“Living a life aligned with Jesus is extremely difficult.

We practice and practice, trying to get even a few basics right.

It’s mostly unglamorous work, as unglamorous

as brushing teeth at the bookends of the day,

or playing scales and arpeggios in endless fashion while learning the piano.

I’m thoroughly convinced that nothing resembling expertise

exists in the Christian life.

How can you become an expert at receiving

the totally undeserved mercy of God on a daily basis?

There’s a reason we speak meaningfully of *practicing* the faith.

It’s all practice.”

Tables aren’t just the place where we gather with the people we love

and give thanks to God – which we often call saying “grace.”

Tables are where we get to practice receiving and giving God’s grace.

God has invited us to be a part of an incredible banquet –

a metaphor for God’s community –

the place where all of God’s people come together.

And Jesus calls us to do more than just show up and say thank you

for the invitation.

Jesus calls us to *live* our gratitude to God by reaching out
to those who cannot return the favor
and sharing the good news that they are
invited into this community as well.

Maybe, as Jesus suggests, the people we need to reach out to
are the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the ignored, the overlooked.

In our time that might be
the person of color who was profiled and wrongly imprisoned;
the transgender person terrified of how government policies
will impact their life;
the person of a different religion who is looked upon
with suspicion, prejudice, or even murderous rage;
the immigrant who has lived among us for decades,
working hard and paying taxes
and who now lives in fear of being deported;
the people who hold political views so different from yours
that it becomes all too easy to see them as less than;
It might even mean offering grace and forgiveness to someone
in your life who doesn't deserve it
and who wouldn't do the same for you.

At a time in our national discourse when politicians themselves –
from both parties – are condoning and stoking the worst impulses
of fear and violence in the electorate,
this suggestion from Jesus about who belongs at God's table
and who we are called to bring into the fold
is something we all need to hear.

According to Jesus there is always more room at God's table
and no one, ***not one person***, is to be left out of this feast.

Inviting other people to join us at God's table
means we must be willing to transform the pyramid
of power and privilege into a table
where everything is served family style,
passed around from one person to the next
in a continual dance of receiving and giving,
of accepting God's gracious gift and paying it forward.

In one of his last writings he before he was murdered, an essay titled,
"The World House,"
Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that, for peace and equity to be realized,
individuals and nations would have to look beyond their own interest
and work for what is best for all of humankind.

He called for a revolution of values, for the formation of
“a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern
beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation.”

In reality, he said, this is a call “for an all-embracing and unconditional love
for all [people],”

in contrast to the self-defeating path of hatred and retaliation.

In his conclusion, King wrote, “We are now faced with the fact
that tomorrow is today.

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.”

King wrote those words more than fifty years ago.

And while it may be true that nothing resembling expertise
exists in the Christian life,

if we aren’t yet convinced that tomorrow is today,

if we aren’t feeling confronted –

every time we read the news –

with the fierce urgency of now,

then we have more practicing to do

We all have a lot more practicing to do.

Fortunately, God’s invitation to us is always open.

It is always **now** that we are invited to experience God’s grace and love,
to sit at God’s table with *all* of God’s children.

And it is an invitation we are empowered not just to answer
but to extend to others,
especially to those children of God
who desperately need to know – NOW – that they, too, are worthy,
they too are loved, they too, just like us, are the recipients
of the totally undeserved mercy of God, every day.

Amen.