

## **Sermon – September 1, 2019**

### **“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”**

Text: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

I can’t believe Jesus is invited to dinner! Wasn’t it just last Sunday that he was ridiculed for healing a bent over woman on a Sabbath to the horror of the religious leaders? And didn’t Jesus alarmed his listeners two Sundays ago that he’s bringing discord not peace among the people? Who is in his right mind to even bother inviting someone like him – branded as a troublemaker – who cannot control his tongue to speak truth to power? Believe it or not, Jesus had been invited to a Sabbath dinner despite his unpleasant encounters with the religious and political leaders! I think his reputation as a rabbi earned him a seat at the table!

Sabbath dinners were of utmost importance for Jews, for they were a sign of acceptance and social standing. Guests were invited, tables were spread with fine food and places of honour were assigned. The most coveted seats were those at the right or the left hand-side of the host. In that dinner, the leading citizens, perhaps of entire Jerusalem were invited. The intellectuals. The politicians. The high priests. The affluent. Members of the Sanhedrin. One particular group would be the Pharisees. The Pharisees were both a political party and a religious group that insisted on the strict observance of Jewish law. The host was a noted Pharisee in Jerusalem. This particular Pharisee had a beautiful mansion located high in the hills overlooking Jerusalem. The noble ladies came to dinner with their gold necklaces and their strings of pearls draped around their colourful expensive evening gowns. The men also looked very regal in their purpled linens, with their gold rings displayed prominently on their fingers. There was the pep talk that goes with sophisticated hors’d’oeuvres, best wine and flashy smiles. Everybody was being witty, disarming and ever so clever. People seem to be having a good time.

When Jesus arrived, all eyes were on him. I suspect Jesus was wearing his very ordinary garment with a pair of very shabby sandals – the ones he always wears when he’s teaching or healing people. One guy whispered to the other – “here comes the rabble-rouser. I wonder what he’s up to now.” Jesus watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honour around the table. In those days, tables were lower and closer to the floor than we are used to and guests would recline at couches or large pillows around the table. The tables would be in the shape of a

U with the host and most honoured guests at the head table. In the event an honoured guest would show up a bit late, someone who had taken a position near the host might be asked to find another spot so that the more important guest might be seated near the host. Jesus looked around and he noticed that those seated at the head table were looking proud and tall like peacocks.

Then Jesus couldn't help it any longer. His tongue was itching to say what's on his mind. Jesus discloses a spiritual truth as he talks about table etiquette. "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honour. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host and then you will be moved to another seat." I think Jesus was trying to say: "Why are you people trying to be so important? Why are you so anxious to be seated at the head table? Why can't we all sit together in an ordinary table and have a good conversation?" Everybody was embarrassed by his opening remarks. And Jesus continues, "When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place." Honour in the feast of God's table cannot be taken or demanded, it can only be received as a gift, which is grace. To make the matter worst, Jesus even questioned the guest list. He looked at the host and said, "I see you've invited your friends, and those in your social clubs and your rich neighbors. But where are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Where's my friend Zaccheus? Where's Bertha - the bent-over woman? Where are the tax collectors? The peasants? The farmers? At this point the guests were so uncomfortable that some of them were eyeing for the nearest exit to go out. And then he continues to lecture everyone on the true meaning of humility, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In God's dinner party, the tables will be radically overturned; the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled-- this is the counter-cultural vision of the reign of God.

Tables radically overturned. That's what Tommy Douglas, the famous Saskatchewan premier also known as the father of universal health care in Canada experienced when he was invited at a dinner that changed his life forever. This time the crowd were students, labourers and farmers. In *New Beginnings*, a book written by Eric Koch, retired CBC broadcaster and author, Koch tells a story of Tommy Douglas, being invited to a dinner one evening in September of 1943. Tommy Douglas, at that time was a member of the parliament representing

the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. CCF was founded in 1932 by a number of socialist, agrarian, co-operative, and labour groups in Calgary, which later became the National Democratic Party or NDP. Unbeknownst to many, Douglas was also an ordained Baptist minister who embraced the social gospel. During dinner, Douglas requested the host, to help save his political career by going to the legislature in Regina and accuse Douglas of being a communist. According to Douglas, this will give him the chance to speak before the legislature and persuade them of his stand that socialists are not communists. So it happened on a Monday morning that while Douglas was on his feet speaking about the medical care that the dinner host sitting in the visitors' gallery screamed and said: "Hey, you Douglas! Why don't you go to Moscow where you belong?" With this cue, Douglas seized the opportunity to reply to the accusation. And his speech that day changed the course of his career and became the premier of Saskatchewan for 17 years. This is part of what he said: "We socialists have nothing in common with communists except one thing. We also believe that those who have money and privilege should share their wealth with those who do not. We think these goals can be achieved through evolution not revolution, by persuasion not force, by cooperation not competition, without confiscating anybody's private property..." And wearing his clergy hat, he continued his speech: "God gave us all the power of reason, the common sense, the inborn feeling for justice to make this possible."

Tommy Douglas was born from humble beginnings – his father was an iron moulder from Scotland and a strong supporter of the Labour Party and his mother a housekeeper who introduced Tommy Douglas to Christian faith. His experience of poverty, unemployment, violence and injustices, of striking workers being put down or even killed by those in power, of those dying in hospitals because they cannot afford the medical bills, of his own personal struggles of physical injuries - all these shaped Tommy Douglas' ambition to be the voice of the people. And he rose to power bringing with him his own interpretation of Jesus' gospel - to truly love others by addressing the social ills of the society and doing something about them while remaining humble and down to earth. In June of 1944, Douglas led his party to victory and earned 47 seats out of 53 in Saskatchewan legislature, making him one of the well-respected leaders in Canadian history. Because of his leadership and through his future

constituents, we now enjoy universal health care in Canada. Through his example, we are more aware that faith and politics go hand in hand. In my opinion, Douglas was an advocate of Jesus' teachings on radical hospitality, humility and social justice.

So what is this about being humble and the virtue of humility that Jesus would like us to emulate? To be humble. Does it mean to feel inferior? Does it mean to put yourself down? Does it mean to compare yourself to others and come up short? Does it mean to have a walking inferiority complex? I don't think so. Is the word humility equivalent to being timid? To be a mouse in the corner? To be afraid to say what's on your mind? To be scared to stand up and be counted? I don't think so. Humility, according to Arbinger Institute, is the ability to see the truth of oneself—strengths and weaknesses, ups and downs, contributions and needs—without self-justification. True humility, in other words, is radical self-awareness.” This radical self-awareness is an attitude of the heart which realizes that all good gifts come from God. “All of my talents. All of my money and resources. All my personality traits which allow me to advance in life...Therefore, how can I boast? How can I use these God-given gifts as a measuring stick to elevate myself above others?”<sup>1</sup>

Through this gospel story in Luke, Jesus invites us to embrace a wide circle of diversity and inclusion. He reminds us that God's open table is not only meant for everyone, but especially for those whom some would consider unlikely guests. On this Labour Day weekend, let us be reminded that there is a place at the table for everyone including those who have had the chair ripped out from under them because of poverty, or social standing or illness. Labourers, farmers, CEO's, politicians, tradespeople, scientists, homemakers, church workers, volunteers - the list is endless. Jesus directs us to invite friends, neighbours and strangers alike into our lives – whether it be a family party or a community gathering or simple one-on-one encounters.

American theologian Debie Thomas says it beautifully: “When we dare to gather at Jesus's table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us...To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that

define our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our Presidential elections... it's what we're called to do — to humble ourselves and place our hope in a radically different kingdom... Jesus asks us to believe that our behaviour at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. This is God's world we live in; nothing here is ordinary. In this realm, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels.”<sup>2</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, “Table Manners”, Journey with Jesus. 2016