

# The Head Table

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

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.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Something there is about the human condition that craves order and hierarchy. We need to remind ourselves who’s in charge, where everyone stands in the pecking order. Think about convocation or commencement at a university, everyone dressed in academic robes. The number of stripes on the sleeve of the gown indicates the wearer’s highest academic degree; the colors of the hood, the sash that starts around the neck and falls down the back, indicate your field of study – education or science or engineering or philosophy.

Parades are another way of demonstrating social organization. Going back at least as far as the Middle Ages, communities would have parades to illustrate and to reinforce

hierarchies. Our Fourth of July parades are not that different. We begin with the marching bands and then maybe the Shriners on their minibikes, a selectman or two riding in a convertible, perhaps a member of Congress, then a governor, or even a senator.

The Episcopal Church is also big on hierarchy. When the bishop visits Christ Church, Middle Haddam, she or he is the last person in the processional and the recessional. Some of you may have noticed that sometimes Catharine is the last person in the procession, and sometimes I bring up the rear. That order is not determined arbitrarily or by a flip of a coin. We Episcopalians believe that the most important element of the liturgy is the celebration of Holy Eucharist – more important than the sermon, the music, or anything else. Therefore, whoever is celebrating the Eucharist on a given Sunday is the last and most important person in the liturgical procession.

Order and hierarchy. It's how we organize our world and understand our place within it. Perhaps you were struck, as I was, with the quotation from James Kilpatrick in his obituary in the *Times* a couple of weeks ago. "Conservatives believe that a civilized society demands orders and classes," he wrote in 1978, "that men are not inherently equal."

Jesus begs to disagree.

We all know people who are forever trying to jump the line, trying to pretend that they are more important than they really are. They manage somehow to nose themselves into photographs with important people. They try to hobnob with the rich and famous, even though they are neither. Think about the couple who crashed the state dinner at the White House several months ago. They didn't belong there. They hadn't been invited, yet they showed up with an air of entitlement.

**I**n today's Gospel, Jesus offers a commentary about social hierarchies. Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee, and I can imagine him feeling uncomfortable and out of place. The Pharisees were big on order and hierarchy, which is why they so despised Jesus. He was always upsetting their tidy categories and their sense of order. My reading of Jesus is that he hates pretension. Throughout his ministry, he calls everyone to authenticity, and the kind of showy dinner that the Pharisee offered offended Jesus' sensibilities.

So he offers some thoughts about place cards and seating charts. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet," Jesus says, "do not sit down at the place of honor, in

case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

And I can well imagine Jesus' Pharisee host rolling his eyes. There he goes again, he thinks. Always stirring up trouble. Trying to make people uncomfortable.

Yes, and that's pretty much the point, isn't it? Jesus comes and upsets our tidy little systems and our organized hierarchies. He says that if you want to sit at the head table or get upgraded to first class, don't put yourself forward but wait for others to do so. Rather than jockeying for advantage, defer to others. The first shall be last and the last first.

**B**ut then Jesus goes on to make an even more radical claim. "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," Jesus said. "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

We can only imagine the Pharisee's reaction. Not only does Jesus want him to do away with the place cards, Jesus wants him to invite the riffraff. How can anyone be a social climber when, instead of celebrities and ambassadors and the like, he invites the dregs of society to dinner? It just doesn't make sense.

No, it doesn't. But that's the nature of the gospel. It upends our categories and turns our hierarchies upside down. Jesus commands us to pay attention to "the least of these" and not worry overly much about our own place in the hierarchy. The first shall be last, after all, and the last first.

Luke doesn't tell us how Jesus' dinner at the Pharisee's house turned out, but I suspect that, after Jesus offered his comments, the conversation was a bit stilted. The Pharisee didn't know exactly how to respond.

But maybe not. Maybe the Pharisee, after listening to what Jesus said, told his servants to put the Dom Perignon back in the wine cellar and grab a couple of six-packs of Sam

Adams Summer Ale and join the dinner party out on the screened-in porch. And maybe the Pharisee also told them to open the front door and invite anyone passing by to join the party. And maybe they passed the fancy hors d'oeuvres all around and kicked back and told stories to one another, for that is what the Gospels are all about, after all, telling stories about ourselves and our encounter with Jesus and our encounter with the good news.

It's a pleasant scene, a moment of true authenticity when people relate to one another simply as human beings, one flawed human being to another. No titles. No entitlement. The stuffy old Pharisee rocking back on his chair, kicking off his shoes, and listening to the town drunk or the local harlot, those Jesus called "the least of these." As Jesus said, "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

No social climbing here. No pretensions. A Sam Adams rather than Dom Perignon. No place cards, just a place at the table, even for "the least of these."

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 29, 2010  
Christ Church  
Middle Haddam, Connecticut