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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“We can make the world a better place if we forsake our idols for the glory of God’s Kin-dom by humbling ourselves into servant ministers seeking the well-fair and well-being of the least among us, not least of which is our environment...”

Jeremiah 2: 4-13
Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
Luke 14: 1, 7-14
Psalm 81: 1, 10-16

The Ranchman’s Club, is one of Calgary, Alberta’s premier and oldest private clubs in the city. Luminaries of government and business alike patronize its hallowed halls that join various private dining areas and public spaces. I recall the first time I was invited to dinner there. It was a farewell gathering to fête the former Rector of the church I presently working at as its assistant interim rector. Seating was accorded by the host with little name tags at each immaculately laid out place-setting. I was dazzled by the display of finery, as would anyone stepping into that atmosphere, especially for the first time. Anything and everything was at your disposal: whatever pre-dinner wine or cocktail you desired was available for the asking. The hand-written menu listed the choices for the evening, and upon making your choice, the silverware was changed out as were the beverage glasses to suit the entrée you had chosen. Who knew you needed special stemware for certain wines to complement the dish you ordered. Who knew different utensils were required as well. Surprisingly, there were no prices affixed to anything, which left me wondering what the cost for such a gathering would be – after all there were twelve of us that evening. That’s when the little voice in my head said: if you have to ask, you cannot afford. Needless to say, it left a lasting impression upon me.

I dined as a guest at the Club many more times during my stay in Calgary, and in each and every instance, I was treated like royalty. It was so different from any other gathering I had been to before or since. Such formality can often be found, though, at wedding receptions, but not all them. I am sure most of us have been to weddings and the associated receptions. Some

of them were probably casual while others more formal. Jesus' ministry begins at what I would describe as an informal wedding, the one in Cana, where folks seemed content to mingle and celebrate together (no one there seemed overly concerned with stemware). In today's reading, we hear Jesus being part of a much more formal gathering where placement of individuals matter. And therein begins the conundrum: where to be seated and who makes that determination.

As anyone who has had to ascribe a seat to a guest knows, placement matters. Who sits closer to the table of honor? Who has position in the community and where do they sit in relation to other powerbrokers? And then there are the social climbers among us who seek out the luminaries of society and fudge the place cards accordingly (you know who you are!). After all, being seen with the correct people can be a step up the ladder of success. However, Jesus is having none of nonsense and uses this opportunity to teach a valuable lesson about the Kingdom of God (for those who are unfamiliar with my usage of that word, I do not say k-i-n-g-d-o-m, but kin-dom for we are all kin in the eyes of God).

For weeks now, you have been hearing me speak that God's love embraces all, not just a select few. Matter-of-fact, I have argued in-line with liberation theology that the marginal and disempowered of society are the preferred people with whom God aligns most. That in and of itself is humbling to the privileged, because the theses of Liberation Theology is anti-classism; classism being a very real problem in our First World culture. If you do not think so, just remember how often, upon meeting someone for the first time, the interrogation begins: where do you work, where did you study, where do you live, what are your family connections, etc. You know the questions! In light of that, Jesus asks different questions. Questions to help us be humble and aware of other's needs.

Our behavior matters, says Jesus. For the first shall be last, and the last first in God's Kingdom. Honoring the Christ in the other is paramount to God's way of ordering society, of honoring placement in the hierarchy of life. It dismantles our self-constructed idols. Idols of wealth and entitlement. You want to make inroads with God? Be a servant to all and forsake the accolades of privilege. Jesus is very clear here. Who do you invite to dinner? You don't invite friends and likeminded people, individuals you want to make connections with for personal gain. Invite the stranger, the very person you do not want to associate with on the grounds they may hold different opinions than your own or are of a different class. The heavenly banquet

will be a very interesting place if that is the case, because you may be seated next to the very person you sought to avoid your whole life. You may call that hell; God calls it mercy, for the person we most seek to avoid is often the one who has the lessons to teach us that we most need to learn about ourselves. Think about that for a moment.

We all want pride of position and placement. We all want to be seen with the “beautiful people,” the powerbrokers, policy makers, artisans. People who have gained stature in society. But God’s plan is so much different than that and Jesus explains it so well when he asks us to be humble. Humble of heart, mind, and spirit.

There is so much craziness in this world that it is so easy to get swept-up in the idolatry. So, so easy. Jeremiah, the prophet, warns people of this very phenomena, of substituting God’s mercy with our own self-interest. Of substituting God’s desire for a Kin-dom built on love and forbearance with a world focused on avarice and greed. More people seem to be interested in whether we are experiencing a bull or bear market than the plight of those working for the captains of industry and masters of capitalism. The very individuals who are given pride of placement at the wedding feast Jesus attends. We have it backwards, and that can be daunting as well as depressing. But we can turn things around if only we have the conviction of our hearts to follow Jesus’ lead – to heed his words.

We can make the world a better place if we forsake our idols for the glory of God’s Kin-dom by humbling ourselves into servant ministers seeking the well-fair and well-being of the least among us, not least of which is our environment (it breaks my heart and angers my spirit to witness the wonton destruction of the Amazon through deforestation for commercialized industry which affects wetlands, and oceans, and tundra without discrimination). Personally, I am tired of national leadership pandering to the influences of finance and commerce by ignoring the degradation of our natural habitat as well as the demoralization and exploitation of people and their culture. Who do you think will be seated at the head of the table at the heavenly banquet in God’s Kin-dom? Whoever honors God will be granted that privilege, whoever humbles themselves in service to others, they will be honored guests at God’s banquet. Not the exploiters and opportunists. They are seemingly enjoying themselves now, but there is a price to pay for such gluttony. That is the moral of Jesus’ teaching: God’s invitation to the banquet is not dependent on your worldly accomplishments measured in what you have attained. Rather, it is in how you are in service to the least amongst you, how you care for this

fragile earth, its resources, its native peoples and their varied cultures. We hear this mandate when Jesus, on the night before his death, speaks to his disciples the words of servant ministry. From John's Gospel: Jesus says: "You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." That is the commission we are given on Maundy Thursday and which is embodied in today's parable and lesson.

The Kin-dom of God is not a private club where only the well-healed may attend. The heavenly banquet is for all who humble themselves before God and follow Jesus' lead in servant ministry. Each of us has been given an invitation to the wedding feast – where, do you think, you will be asked to sit?