

## **You're Invited: By Whom?**

**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

**Second Baptist Church, Memphis**

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I don't know about you, but I love getting mail. I think everyone loves getting things in the mail with your name on it. I love going to the mailbox to get the mail. I don't know why. I almost never get anything good or interesting. But I am relentless about checking the mail. Sometimes Heidi will ask me what I'm hoping to get. For whatever reason, I love going to the mailbox.

Once, when I was a senior in college, I drove two hours one way just to check the mail. I had gotten my letter of acceptance from the University of Texas law school, but I had also applied to Yale Law School. It was the week of Spring Break, and I hadn't heard from Yale one way or another.

I went home to Dallas for Spring Break, but it was killing me to go a whole week without being able to check the mail back at school. So about midway through the week I talked my 84 year old grandmother into driving with me the two hours down from Dallas to Waco to check my mail.

Sure enough, I did have an envelope from Yale, but it was a small envelope—always a bad sign. I didn't get in. So we drove the two hours back to Dallas.

Most of us love to get things in the mail. It's always nice to get some kind of invitation in the mail. What's the first thing I looked at when I drove from Dallas to Waco to get the mail?

What's the first thing you look at when you get an invitation in the mail? The return address. The first thing we look at is who is it from.

And who it's from makes a difference, right? Depending on who it's from, this piece of mail might make you happy or excited or maybe something totally different. Depending on whose name is on the return address, you might rip the envelope open immediately or just toss it on the desk to be opened later.

Over the next four weeks, we will be focusing in our worship on an invitation. The invitation that we are talking about is sent by God. Not us. Not the church.

And maybe thinking in this way about that invitation helps us in making connections with those outside the church. Instead of thinking that "they" are the "lost" and we are to find them—maybe we need to shift our thinking to realize that God is the great sender, the great seeker, the one who forever sends and seeks, and we are all invitees.

We good church folks, just like every other person in this world, are invitees, not inviters. If we first understand ourselves as invitees, we might be in better position to be good hosts.

In the gospel of Luke, chapter 14, Jesus talks about whom God invites to his banquet and how to act once you get there.

First, Jesus talks about how to act at the banquet when you get there. What brought this up was Jesus was at a dinner party, and he took notice of how all the guests were behaving.

William Willimon, Methodist Bishop in Birmingham, says he had a church member once who, in his job with a large corporation, was responsible for hiring people for his company's executive training program. He was the one who had to figure out if these young upstarts could cut the mustard as aspiring execs.

He gave them tests, asked for recommendations, looked at their college transcripts.

However, he said that his most effective test was the evening he took each of them out to dinner and observed their behavior at the table.

*Watch how a person eats, he claimed, that will tell you all you need to know about their character.*

Jesus knew that how a person behaves at the dinner table says a lot. In this particular case, Jesus noticed that all of the guests had their own techniques for getting to sit in the best seats. When it was nearly time to eat, the guests would start milling about, just happening to be standing beside a chair of honor.

They hoped it would be so subtle that no one would notice. But Jesus did. And he advised this strategy instead:

*10But 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. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

The truth is that it seems to be in our human nature to jockey for position. In one of his sermons, John Claypool talked about learning an interesting detail that reminded him that for all the ways we humans have changed over the years there are certain habits that continue to persist and need to be challenged by the vision of reality Jesus came into the world to embody.

The detail he was referring to was a practice when the stagecoach was the main means of transportation in the Wild West. The vehicles back then were relatively small. At most, they carried six passengers. However, tickets were still sold in different classes kind of like today on airlines with first class and then the others.

The distinction, however, did not have to do with the size of the seat or the kind of food that was served, but rather what was expected of the ticket holder in case the stagecoach got into a difficult situation like a deep bog of mud or an incline too steep to be able to negotiate. It turns out that there were three types of tickets sold on the stagecoaches. The first class, which, of course, was the most expensive, entitled the ticket owner to remain in the stagecoach no matter what conditions might be faced. When you got the most expensive ticket, what this meant is that you were exempt from having to put forth any kind of effort.

A second-class ticket meant that if difficulty arose, you had to get out and walk alongside the stagecoach until the difficulty could be resolved.

The cheapest ticket—the third-class one—called on the holder to take responsibility for the difficulty. This meant they not only had to get out of the coach when there was a problem, but they

also had to, alongside the driver, get down in the mud and do whatever had to be done so that the vehicle could either get through the mud or get up the hill. They were required what today we would call "sweat equity" as part of being a third-class holder of a ticket. Needless to say, this was the least prestigious of all the categories. When you think about this practice on the stagecoach, you can't help but realize that this is reflective of our human nature: to equate the category of first class with privilege and being exempt from having to do the most menial kinds of work.

And at the same time, you can't help but realize how radically different Jesus' hierarchy of values was. When he came to live upon the earth, he gave a very different interpretation to this metaphor of first class.

In the most literal sense, he turned the value system of the world upside down and dared to say that in God's eyes the really first-class reality was not the privilege of having everything done for you, but rather lay in a willingness to do the opposite and assume the role of a servant who is willing to deal with the difficulty and is more concerned to help than to simply be waited on by others. Remember the last night of Jesus' earthly life, when he was longing to share a meal with his friends. They had gathered that Passover eve in an upper room, but an awkward mood settled over that little group that night. You see, they had been walking all day on the dirt roads, and their feet very much needed to be washed before they could recline around the table to eat.

However, that very day the disciples had been heatedly arguing about who among them was going to be the greatest; that is, who was going to get to occupy the places of preeminence in

what they thought was the coming kingdom. A competition for place, for status, had badly divided the group, and not one of them wanted to do the dirty work of washing somebody else's feet.

Let's face it. When your overwhelming desire is to get ahead of someone else, the last thing you want to do is to have to stoop over and appear to be beneath that other person. In that moment of awkward impasse, it was Jesus who stepped in and moved redemptively.

In an utterly magnificent phrase, the writer of the fourth gospel says, *Jesus, knowing he came from God and was going to God, got up from the table, laid aside his garment, wrapped himself in a towel, and proceeded to deal with the dirt; that is, to do the work of a servant and wash the feet of his 12 companions.*

And when he had finished, he resumed his place at table and said in effect, *I have modeled for you who I am and who you are. This is the true secret of greatness, not the one who lords himself or herself over you as if they were superior, but the one who is free to do whatever the situation demands because their ego needs have already been met by the grace of God.*

*[Thanks to Dr. John Claypool in a sermon preached on August 29, 2004 for Day 1]*

In Luke 14, Jesus talks about how to act at God's banqueting table. And since God is the one who does the inviting, not us, Jesus talks about whom God invites to his table.

<sup>12</sup>*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.* <sup>13</sup>*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.* <sup>14</sup>*And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

I said at the beginning that it is very important for us to understand that when we talk about invitations to the kingdom of God, invitations into God’s family, it is God who does the inviting, not us. God is the great seeker, the great inviter.

And that fact makes a great difference, not just in how we behave at the banquet, but it makes a great difference in who gets invited in the first place. God’s invitation is sent far and wide.

If you’ve ever been to Sunday School you know this to be true. This is the God who sets the other 99 aside to go searching for the one who has strayed. This is the God who in Christ approached the outcast Zacchaeus and invited himself over to Zacchaeus’s house. This is the God who in Christ invited the Samaritan woman at the well into a conversation. This is the God who invited Sarah to have a child and who went out into the wilderness to invite the stuttering shepherd Moses to speak to the Pharaoh and lead God’s people to freedom. This is the God who invited a young girl named Mary to participate in the bringing to birth of his son. This is the God who in Christ consistently invited to his table people from the wrong group and the wrong place in the world and the wrong side of the tracks.

If you know anything about God at all, you have to know that if it is God who is sending out the invitations and not us, the invitations are going go out far and wide—way beyond our little circles.

So Jesus gives a lesson here in how God sends invitations to everyone and how ridiculous it is for any of us to think that we deserve seating at the head of the table, how I deserve first class seating ahead of all the others.

A little magazine called HeartWarmers recently reported a story that took place on a British Airways flight from Johannesburg. An aristocratic, middle-aged white South African lady had found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the flight attendant over to complain about her seating.

*What seems to be the problem, Ma'am?* asked the attendant.

*Can't you see?* this relic from the days of Apartheid said, *You've sat me next to a kafir* (a disparaging term for a black African). *I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!*

The flight attendant calmed the woman down and said: *The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class.*

The woman cocked a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her, not to mention many of the surrounding passengers.

A few minutes later the flight attendant returned with good news, which she delivered to the lady, who couldn't help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin.

*Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class.*

Before the lady had a chance to answer, the flight attendant continued: *It's most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that anyone should be forced to sit next such an obnoxious person.*

With that, she turned to the black man and said, *So if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your first class seat ready for you.*

At which point, the surrounding passengers erupted into an ovation while the man walked to the front of the plane.  
*[thanks to Dr. Mickey Anders, Pikeville Christian Church, Pikeville, Kentucky, for this story]*

Jesus said that those who exalt themselves—those who seat themselves at the head of the table, those who seat themselves in first class, those who don't want to be seated near certain others—those who exalt themselves will be humbled. But those who humble themselves—those who recognize that it is God who sends out the invitations, not us, those who understand that since we are all invitees we are all on the same level, those who understand that the invitations that God sends represent the wideness of God's mercy—those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Look at the return address on the invitation. Who it's from makes all the difference, doesn't it?