

The Conditions for Change

Luke 14:1, 7-11



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For every social occasion there is a proper protocol. Even in a world changing as rapidly as ours today - or especially because our world is changing as rapidly as ours is today - knowing the proper protocol in every situation is imperative. In the opening pages of her 519-page book entitled *Complete Guide to Executive Manners*, the late Letitia Baldrige wrote about the “complicated” and “multifaceted” social revolution that she observed in the 1980s and that she credited as necessitating the writing of her book (p. 4). “Never before,” she wrote, “have so many executives of such diverse business backgrounds shared the same workplace. Not only do we have an ever-increasing influx of other nationalities entering the executive workplace, Americans themselves, depending on the age group into which they fall, were raised under very different cultural and sociological influences” (p. 5). As someone who had worked as an executive for thirty-seven years in four different countries and as an aide to the U.S. ambassador at American embassies in Paris and Rome as well as Chief of Staff for First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House, Letitia Baldrige was an expert in social protocol.

In her book, she discussed the significance of seating order at large formal meals. So sensitive an issue was this that at one White House dinner during John F. Kennedy’s administration, when she seated the French ambassador to Washington in a seat that he felt was beneath his proper rank, he stalked out of the White House before the meal even began (p. 305). To avoid giving offense, it is important, she explained, to learn how to rank the guests on your guest list. It is important to know who outranks whom. Senators outrank congressmen and congresswomen, and you also have to consider seniority and any major positions held. Things get more complicated when, at the last minute, guests drop on or off the guest list. Once when the top U.S. senator arrived at a dinner with no prior notice, Mrs. Baldrige had to reseal about fifty of the top-ranking guests (p. 306).

Most of us don’t encounter the need to be informed about such formal social protocol. Nevertheless, we have all likely experienced, to some degree or another, occasions when we have had to pay a little extra attention to seating order. On the occasion of my grandmother’s funeral, what could have been a chaotic time for our large extended family was more orderly than I anticipated, because it seemed, everyone knew his or her place. The evening before the day of the funeral, all of my mother’s six siblings and their families were gathered at my uncle’s home. Given that there were so many of us and that people were arriving at different times, still flying in from all over the country and from overseas, dinner that evening was a casual affair. With our plates full of food, we sat wherever we could find a seat, some of us at the dining table, some of us at the nearby kitchen counter, some of us in the family room. By the time we were well into our meal, the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of my grandmother’s brother, the last person to arrive and the eldest person to arrive. Upon his arrival, we were on our feet, crowded in the foyer to greet him with joy. Received by all of his nieces and nephews and by their children, my great uncle was led into the house where he could be seated and offered dinner. It seemed like, for the briefest of moments, time stood still while all of us watched to see where he would sit. Once that became apparent, before I knew it, everyone else’s seating changed. Following the example of our elders, with ease and no fuss at all, we swiftly rearranged ourselves.

It seems that similar last-minute scenarios where seats needed shuffling could have been observed in the ancient world in which Jesus lived. In Jesus’ day, inappropriately seating oneself at a dinner party could lead to offense, disgrace, and embarrassment. It was customary that the most honored guests, usually distinguished by social rank or age, would be seated closest to the host. It was also customary that the most honored guests would arrive last to a dinner party. Therefore, it was not uncommon for a guest who arrived earlier and who had already seated himself in a place of honor to be asked to give up his seat for the late-arriving, most honored guest, and since all the other guests had already taken their seats, only the seat of least honor would

likely be available for him. Where the order of seating took place according to distinction, there was always a good chance that someone would be disgraced.

In the story we heard from the Gospel of Luke this morning, Jesus is attending a meal. As a guest, he observes the behavior of the other guests. Apparently as they arrive, they take their seats according to the usual protocol at such social gatherings. Here we find Jesus offering practical advice to guests about the seats they should choose for themselves at the dinner table.

It is advice that Jesus himself most likely learned from the book of Proverbs, where in chapter 25, verse 6, it states, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." Though Jesus isn't speaking here about how people should conduct themselves in the presence of royalty, his words nevertheless convey similar advice to people attending a banquet meal.

It may be tempting for us to treat this story and the proverb in it as nothing more than common-sense proverbial wisdom. There was a time, however, when the book of Proverbs was a significant source of spiritual instruction. The apostle Paul, with his solid rabbinic training, could quote from Proverbs, and here we find Jesus doing the same. Biblical scholar Ellen Davis tells us that the lessons in the book of Proverbs were originally meant for meditation, one proverb at a time. Carrying on the practice of meditating on the proverbs, medieval monks spoke of "chewing" a proverb "like grains of spices until they yielded their full savor" (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, Westminster Bible Companion, pp. 11-12).

As one reads the Gospel of Luke from beginning to end, it becomes clear that Jesus has chewed on this particular proverb for some time and that for him the social protocol advised in it takes on multiple and profound meanings. When Jesus says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," he has in mind much more than the proverbial wisdom that could help someone to navigate the customary protocol at dinner parties, though that too is included. From beginning to end, there are more references in the Gospel of Luke to meals, tables, and banquets than in any other gospel. Luke depicts the table as the setting for much of Jesus' teaching, reproving, and welcoming. When we come to chapter 14 in the Gospel of Luke, we find four separate stories in close sequence - one of which we heard today - that all take place in contexts of meals. In chapter 22 (22:30), Jesus speaks about the table in God's heavenly kingdom at which he and his disciples will eat, and in chapter 24, Jesus is at the dinner table with his disciples when, upon breaking bread with them, their eyes are opened and they recognize their resurrected Messiah for the first time (Luke 24:30). All of these depictions of Jesus in the context of communal meals have led biblical scholars to recognize that "nothing can be for Luke more serious than a dining table" (Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation*, p. 175). There is in Luke's gospel such a progression in table imagery that a mundane meal site is transformed into a symbol of the kingdom of God (Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, volume 4, p. 25).

In the story we read this morning, it is important to note that Jesus speaks of not just any communal meal. The particular image that Jesus provides is that of a wedding feast. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet," he says at the beginning of his parable. With this introduction of setting, we know immediately that proper protocol will be of utmost significance. Not many other occasions call for more decorum than a wedding banquet. The particular image of a wedding feast, however, seems to have significance that goes beyond being an occasion that calls for decorum.

For Jesus, talk about a wedding banquet is not merely social commentary. According to biblical scholar Fred Craddock, in the parable we read today, wedding talk is "kingdom talk" (Fred B. Craddock, p. 176). Jesus often draws on wedding imagery when he speaks of the kingdom of God, for a wedding banquet is much like the heavenly banquet that Jesus imagines. When someone asks him, "Will only a few be saved?" Jesus responds with a description of the heavenly banquet to which "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). Jesus envisions the feast in God's kingdom as an occasion to which all people are invited. And it is this point that Luke seems unable to underscore enough.

The conviction that God's covenant with Israel has been extended to the world so that people from all tribes and nations can come into God's household can be felt when in chapter 12 we hear Jesus say, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

It is clear that the kind of kingdom Jesus has in mind is one created by spiritual, covenantal kinship, not conventional kinship. Biology, nationality, race, and ethnicity had all been the basis for conventional kinship. As far as Jesus is concerned, the kingdom of God can only be based on a spiritual, covenantal kinship - a kinship by which anyone, Jew or Gentile, could be in faithful relationship with God, trusting in and being loyal to God.

To draw out a vision of the kingdom of God in which covenantal kinship binds people together, Jesus appropriates wedding language and imagery. What could be more appropriate? For it is at weddings that we make families out of strangers. This was precisely the message preached at my close friend's wedding years ago. Her pastor began the wedding homily by reminding everyone that while you can choose many things in life - career, friends, material possessions - you cannot choose your family. For better or worse, you are stuck with the family into which you are born. Then the pastor made her next point, the main point: that by exchanging their covenantal wedding vows with one another, my friend and her partner were choosing to become family. In essence, they were choosing to be bound to one another. This is what a wedding accomplishes: it creates family ties where none existed before.

To every couple whose wedding I officiate, I remind them that they are entering into a covenant modeled after God's covenant with us. I tell them that through this covenantal relationship they will be a new creation; they will not remain as they were before, for in them God is creating a new family.

We often call the church "a family," and rightly so. Nevertheless, we don't usually think of the ties among church members to be as strong as matrimonial ties. And when they are, that too can be problematic. In an article entitled, "The Hospitality Imperative," Lutheran pastor Peter Marty writes about the biblical imperative for the church to be hospitable to strangers, and he warns that sometimes it is precisely the family-like quality of churches that gets in the way of true hospitality. "Congregation members who love their church," he writes, "often think of it as family. But what social system is tougher to break into from the outside than a family" (Reflections: Yale Divinity School, Fall 2009, p. 22)?

Every family has its own protocols, conventions, and customs, and sometimes these things can make it hard for an outsider to become an insider. I once heard of a family for which it was the practice that at large family gatherings the children would sit at the children's table. In this particular family, as the children grew older they had literally to graduate in order to be seated with the grown-ups. Only after you got your Ph.D. could you join the grown-up table. Until a new daughter-in-law pointed out the strangeness of this protocol, the family had accepted it simply as the way it was.

Just as every family and social group has its own protocols for including new people, so does the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, whatever order we might be accustomed to will most likely be upset. Indeed, some may be first who are last and some may be last who are first. The greatest may need to become like the youngest. Without a doubt, our distinctions will be disgraced, because we will all be humbled by hospitality. At no other table will we be offered greater hospitality than at the Lord's table, where Christ is the host and we are all guests.

To this table, everyone is invited. So know that here you are at home, but don't get too comfortable in your seat, because when we are seated at Christ's table, everyone's place changes.