

## *A Place of Privilege, Guilherme Almedia*

*Luke 14:1, 7-14*

*Jesus* is a masterful storyteller. His ministry is highlighted by parables, stories, and displays of God's transformative love. Being the captivating storyteller that he is, *The Lord of the Universe* knows that transformative concepts are best learned when they are shared and embodied through stories. Like every great story, *Jesus'* stories have a background, a context, an audience, and a lesson to be learned.

In our Gospel reading for today, *Jesus* exhorts the guests of an important dinner party to consider their own privileges and act in a humble and hospitable way towards all guests. This parable ultimately speaks to the humility of God's children. It instructs against pride and the important work of resisting our tendencies of segregating Us - Them, while encouraging an attitude of generosity and abundance.

Given the preceding text, the place of our story was most likely in Perea, on the Sabbath, at a dinner party hosted by one of the leaders of the Pharisees. Of course this dinner party was no ordinary feast. The table was spread and the trap was set. *Jesus* had ventured into a tense situation. Our dinner party parable is set against the background and context of the Pharisees' pernicious plans that were being plotted against *Jesus*. *Our Lord and Savior* knew of those plans and these dramatic encounters with Pharisees were not uncommon. In fact, conflict is at the center of God's ordained journey to the Cross. *Jesus* knew full well what was in store for Him. His goal that Sabbath was to expose the Pharisees' hypocrisy and pride.

*Jesus* was no stranger to drama at dinner parties - like that time when the unnamed woman anointed *Jesus'* feet with expensive perfume and her own tears, or like that time when *Jesus* delivered the "Woe to You, Pharisees and Experts of the Law" speech. Needless to say, *Jesus* knew how to make people uncomfortable.

As someone who works both in theatre and in ministry, I am actively resisting the phrase "safe space." The notion of total safety in any space is harmful and illusory. A brave space instead acknowledges that we are constantly working against our inherited and often harmful biases and are willing to work "lovingly and bravely" through conflict.

My resistance to the phrase "safe space" is best described in Luke 4 when *Jesus* is leading worship on the Sabbath at the synagogue in Nazareth. *Jesus* proceeded to chant "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. God has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" *Jesus* rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.*"

While we work intentionally to dismantle spaces of oppression and injustice, our goal as Christians is to proclaim - courageously - the good news of God to our fellow humans. The very act of acknowledging our call and vocation is an act of resistance and

courage - through the priesthood of believers, we are all called into a reality of liberation and justice.

*Our Lord Emmanuel* proclaims: “*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.*” His inspiring courage exists in the context of his hometown of Nazareth; that audience was a congregation that knew *Jesus* well. They knew his family. Sometimes our most difficult audience is the one that shares our own privileges.

As Christians, we are called to act bravely and to speak into our relationships with a courageous attitude. We must seek to live in meaningful relationship with our neighbors while renouncing comparisons based on pride or privilege.

The Bannan Forum is a center of active dialogue surrounding matters of social justice, hosted by the Santa Clara University in California, an institution of higher education within the Jesuit Catholic tradition. One of their distinct faculty members is Professor *Stephanie Wildman*, who teaches Law, particularly Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Justice. Some twenty years ago, *Stephanie Wildman* began writing about privilege: an integrated, multi-layered, and largely invisible system of social hierarchy that sustains inequality and subordination in our culture and works in mysterious ways to defeat whatever efforts people might make to better themselves.

Our legal culture permits us to attack discrimination, in some of its manifestations, when we can identify deliberate acts of individuals that cause harm to others because of their social status and identities. Our legal culture makes it difficult, however, for us even to talk about the networks of privilege that silently assign people to subordinate categories because of their race, their gender, or any other of the innumerable characteristics by which people distinguish themselves from others.

*Wildman*'s invaluable contribution has been to identify privilege as a social system, as well as to build concepts and vocabulary with which to make it “visible.” Since *Wildman* established this theory in her 1996 book, *Privilege Revealed*, academic writers have analyzed the structure and dynamics of privilege in a great many areas.

Thinking about privilege and challenging it is an ongoing exercise. It's something that has become part of my daily consciousness. But it's a difficult concept to grapple with - and one that doesn't come easily. I am constantly learning to challenge my position in the world, and understand the power imbalances that I am a part of.

Privilege wasn't just a problem back then, at our Luke 14 dinner party - it's a problem today. It's hard to recognize privilege in us. Someone once said pride is the only disease that makes everyone sick except the one who has it. Pride can also be called vanity. We can see pride and vanity in others, but we are usually blind to it in our own lives. We aren't even aware it's there until there it rears its ugly head. Pride is hard to see in ourselves, but we can easily see it in others. If we think we are not prideful, we are lying to ourselves.

Our Gospel parable brings an equal warning to the host that he should not invite only his friends or people who would

be obligated to return the invitation, but ask those who did not have the means to invite him back in return. By including those who were poor, impaired, disabled and blind, the host would be fulfilling *Jesus*' reminder that *'what you do for the least of these, you do to me'*.

This radical hospitality is a spiritual discipline that constantly challenges our privileges. By following *Jesus*' instruction and inviting all others who don't belong to his circle of privilege, the host embodies an act of resistance to all systems of hierarchy and power. This Gospel truth of service and leadership is the strength by which hospitality can dismantle oppression and exclusivity.

In ancient times, those seated at the lower tables were considered servants to the upper tables. So, those who chose to sit there recognized that although they may have gifts and talents that warranted their sitting in a special place, they were humble enough to realize that these gifts and talents brought them no special treatment. They knew that service, especially service to God, was far more important than privilege.

I wrestle with that calling today, Lake Shore. How do we choose the lower tables? How can we revisit our guest's list and host dinner parties that include all of our neighbors?

Sometimes our attitude of privilege comes out of a myth of scarcity, like *Richard Rohr* calls it, and we momentarily forget that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*. The *Jesus* who calls us to choose the lower seat and to invite all guests to the party is still the same, providing abundantly to all of us. The *Lamb of God* has shared the responsibility of hosting His table with us.

Let us find ways to acknowledge the places of privilege we inhabit. Let us work until privilege is crowded out by Love.

Let us allow *Jesus* to teach us anew that humility of the hymn in Philippians: *Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

Let us pray:

*I hear your call, O God,  
to peace and justice,  
and I confess that I know little of either,  
and worse yet, sometimes I care little.  
Yet there's a place in me that does care,  
a seed of yearning for a compassionate world  
where righteousness prevails.  
Forgive me, God . . . for the injustices I allow to continue by my silence.  
Wash away my small-minded thoughts  
that justice equals revenge,  
my setting things right,  
evening the score.  
Open me to your way – defending the defenseless,  
walking the second mile,  
grace undeserved.  
Transform my clenched fist of entitlement  
into an outstretched hand of healing.  
Give me a heart like yours . . .  
radically loving,  
senselessly merciful,  
passionately pursuing  
Shalom  
your Kingdom come.  
Amen.*