

Who's Invited to the Table?

Watching the HBO series “The Gilded Age” is one of my guilty pleasures. Not only are the costumes and settings a feast for the eye, the social dynamics are fascinating. The show depicts life in 1880’s New York high society. There’s constant jockeying for position: who gets invited to which parties, who gets a box at the opera, who can arrange the most advantageous marriages for their children. I’ve especially enjoyed watching *arriviste* Bertha Russell bludgeon her *nouveau riche* family’s way into the loftiest social circles despite the genteel but steely objections of *grande dame* Lina Astor. The scheming and maneuvering would hurt feelings and ruin futures in real life. On television, and softened by the passage of time, it’s just frivolous fun.

Today’s Gospel reminds me of *The Gilded Age*. Jesus comes to dine at the home of a leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath, and every eye is on him. Luke doesn’t say it’s a prestigious invitation, but we might infer that from the guests’ efforts to claim the seats of highest honor. Nobody fights for a place at the table at a casual lunch among friends. Putting aside the propriety of making one’s servants prepare an elaborate feast on the Sabbath, this is quite the test for a humble rabbi from Nazareth. Perhaps the host expects Jesus to embarrass himself in some politically useful way, or to be dazzled by the luxurious setting and illustrious company. He quickly learns that our Lord is no social climber. Jesus warns the guests against embarrassing themselves by claiming seats intended for more distinguished invitees, then tells the host that he’s invited all the wrong people. He’s right, but it’s hardly polite, and I can’t quite shake the sense that Jesus has a bit too much fun turning the tables on everyone else in the room.

It would be lovely if the games of social precedence that the Pharisee leader and his guests play in this passage had vanished with engraved calling cards and bustles at the end of the Gilded Age, but they’re still with us. So are many of the other inequities of that ostentatious era.

As the show has progressed through its third season, it's gone beyond grand balls and charity luncheons to focus on the harder issues of the day: efforts to claw back from black people the rights they won in the Civil War, the abysmal inequality that women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community suffered no matter their social station, and the pitiful wages and lethal working conditions imposed on the working class so a handful of oligarchs could live like sultans. Gilded Age wealth was inevitably tainted with the sweat, tears and blood of everyday workers, no matter how many libraries, concert halls, universities, hospitals, and churches the robber barons funded. The show hasn't yet turned to the vicious discrimination inflicted on immigrants in the Gilded Age – that may come up in Season Four. If all those problems sound entirely too contemporary, however, it's because they are.

For the last ten to fifteen years, commentators have warned that our postmodern era has entered a Second Gilded Age featuring many of the same injustices as the first. Wealth disparities are an obvious similarity. Last year, Oxfam International reported that 1% of the world's population owns more wealth than 95% of the rest of humanity combined. *Yahoo Finance* reports that, in the United States, the richest 1% own almost 31% of the nation's wealth, and their assets continue to grow. Meanwhile, concerted efforts are underway to decimate the hard-won rights of people of color, the Pride community and women, eviscerate environmental and consumer protections, disempower workers, deprive the vulnerable, cruelly deport immigrants, and silence anyone who dares to object. The parallels aren't perfect. Few of today's robber barons bother with philanthropy. Bill Gates promises to spend down his fortune on lifesaving aid for Africa. Warren Buffett, Michael Bloomberg, George Soros, and billionaire exes Melinda French (formerly Gates) and MacKenzie Scott (formerly Bezos) are known for their generosity. But too many other oligarchs seem more interested in hoarding their wealth than in helping those in

need. Perhaps that's why they donate so much to politicians and causes that promise to make our present inequities permanent. Some of those politicians and causes claim to be Christian; I wonder how much they care about Jesus's actual teachings, including his message today.

If we only listened to the first half of Jesus's words, we might misunderstand him. While it's embarrassing to be evicted from a seat of honor, Jesus isn't telling the guests to resign themselves to whatever social status God has given them, however eager privileged people have been to understand his words that way. Jesus probably wants the guests to see how ridiculous their scramble for prominence really is. The person most deserving of honor at that meal is Jesus himself, and he's not elbowing anybody out of the way. Real power and class don't have to compete for an honored place. Besides, Jesus knows that social standing only matters if you use it to help someone who has less of it than you do. That's where his advice to the host comes in.

We don't know who else is on the Pharisee leader's guest list, but he undoubtedly invited only "important" people to dine, just as Gilded Age socialites only welcomed members of the oldest monied families in New York. Those people were called "Mrs. Astor's 400" because that was as many guests as she could cram into her ballroom. If Mrs. Astor welcomed a newcomer, an old timer would have to be excluded, heaven forbid. No one seems to have thought about whether they respected or even liked other members of their set, or whether they might enjoy meeting someone different. And, until Mrs. Russell and her contemporaries came along, nobody thought to expand their ballrooms, their opera houses, or their guest lists beyond the people they'd always known. Luxurious or not, their lives must have been deadly dull.

Jesus promises his host that, if he opens his home to "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind ... [he] will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." True, and not the whole story. Jesus knows that his host, being accustomed to transactional relationships, will be most

likely to welcome the needy if he thinks he'll be rewarded. What Jesus doesn't say is that, if he does, his host will meet people he would never have known. He'll learn why God loves them and discover that they have gifts and graces he never experienced among his powerful peers. If he stops looking for advantage in every relationship, he might learn about true friendship and love. He might become worthy to lead the Pharisees and, perhaps, teach those who come to his table that selfless love feels better than envious pride. That would be such a blessing that anything else he might receive at the resurrection of the righteous would be mere icing on the cake.

We at St. Luke's aren't oligarchs, but we enjoy considerable privilege that Jesus might like us to use. As the world around us becomes more cruel, we're in a position to embrace people whom others reject. It's not just a matter of donating to charity or signing petitions, important as those things are. It's about banishing whatever craving for prestige pollutes our souls. It's about recognizing that objects are to be used and people are to be loved, not the other way around. It's about refusing to play status games, welcoming newcomers to our established circles, and befriending folks who can't advance our ambitions. Should others criticize our choice of company, it's about calling out their snobbery, calmly and kindly, but without compromise. It's not about shaming them, but about hoping that, after watching us, they might decide to become more loving and gracious themselves. By God's grace, we might just be able to scrape a little of the brassy gilt off our own Gilded Age, so the real gold of divine love can shine through.

As we strive to become as openhearted and inclusive as Jesus calls us to be, our lives will be blessedly enriched. We will learn, grow, and deepen in love through friendships with people we might never have known otherwise. Will we also be rewarded at the resurrection of the righteous? Maybe – Jesus never lies. But why wait? Delicious as icing may be, we can enjoy our cake right now in the company of the friends, new and old, with whom we share it. *Amen.*