Being Told Who You Are
(Luke 14: 1, 7-14)

When I was younger, I loved to fly. I didn't get to do it very often, so when I did, it was a big deal. Of course, when I was younger, taking an airplane was different. They served you actual meals on the plane, and everyone got dressed up, like they were going to church.

I remember the first flight I took; I was probably seven or eight. The flight attendant came and retrieved my brother and me, asking if we'd like to see the cockpit. Um, yeah!

So up we marched to be greeted by the Captain and more buttons, toggle switches, and gauges than we had ever imagined could be crammed into such a comparatively tiny space. The captain shook our hands, and we got a pair of wings to pin to our shirts. All these years later, and I still remember it.

But while I ***used*** to love flying, as I've grown older and had to do it more regularly (and I don't think I'll burst anybody's bubble to say it), flying no longer carries the same romance it used to.

Nowadays, if I'm honest, the whole thing can be rather stress-inducing. Trying to time your arrival at the airport so that you get there with plenty of time, but not so early that you have to sit waiting to board for two hours.

Checking in, you have to pick the right line. Are you a first-class flyer or a premier club member, or are you simply part of the great unwashed who has to cram into economy?

Then you have to figure out the newest rules for going through security. But first, you have to find the right ***security*** line. Do you get into the fast line with TSA PreCheck or Global Entry? What do you have to take off? Belts, maybe, but not shoes anymore. All your electronic devices go in one plastic tub instead of a separate one for each. It is a crapshoot every time.

When you finally get to take a seat at the gate, you have to figure out which boarding group you are in. Are you a Diamond or Platinum club member, in the military, or traveling with small children? Did you pay extra for a higher boarding group? First Class, Business Class, or Economy.

The whole process is meant to put you in some kind of ranked order. You pay more, you get to skip the line. You pay less, and lines are what you get.

Regardless, you’re being told repeatedly where you belong by some authority. Ticket agents, TSA officers, gate agents, flight attendants, and that voice reminding you, "While on the moving walkway …"

In philosophy, that kind of identity mapping has a big fancy name, **interpellation**. It’s a word from Louis Althusser, who said that societies train us to answer when they call out, "Hey, you."

The way you answer and what you answer for is who you become.

When the TSA officer waves you to the long line instead of the short one, that’s the system saying, "Hey, you, ordinary traveler, economy class, this is ***your*** place." And without even thinking, you shuffle to your assigned line, look for your assigned seat. That’s interpellation. Being told who you are.

Did you know that in the Old West, stagecoaches sold different classes of tickets, too? John Claypool talked about this. Apparently, there were three classes of tickets. First class was the most expensive, and third class was the cheapest.

As we've noted, on an airplane, there are significant differences between first class and the cheap seats. First class gets to board before everybody else. They get good stuff to eat and drink. And the seats are usually bigger, less crowded.

But on the stagecoach, all the seats were the same. What differentiated first class from third class wasn't hot towels and fancy drinks. It was responsibility.

If the stagecoach broke down or got stuck, first-class ticket holders didn’t have to ***do*** anything. Second-class ticket holders had to get out and walk alongside until it was fixed or dragged out of the mud. And if you were in third class, you had to get out … and push. You jumped down into the mud and helped.

Claypool said that system captured our human instinct to equate first class with privilege, with not having to get your hands dirty, with not being inconvenienced by whatever’s happening outside your comfortable little cabin. And he said that kind of stratification is exactly the political tree against which Jesus swings his ax.

Now, in our Gospel this morning, Jesus wasn't talking about airplanes or stagecoaches, but he ***was*** talking about the same

kind of social choreography. In Luke 14, he's at the house of a Pharisee, a local leader and a man of influence. Folks are watching Jesus closely, but Jesus is also watching them. He notices how everyone angles for the best couches at the banquet.

In ***that*** world, meals weren't just about food. They were an exercise in drawing up seating charts of the social order. Banquets were where you showed who was important and who wasn’t. The closer you reclined to the host, the more honor you had. The farther away, the more invisible you became.

It's the same game, with fewer boarding groups and more couches. The logic is the same. You're constantly being told who you are, where you belong, and how much you matter.

And Jesus, as he often does, doesn't just notice it … he turns it inside out.

"Do not take the place of honor," he says. "Take the lowest place. Let someone else call you up higher."

It sounds like he is giving banquet etiquette tips, like a first-century Emily Post. But it's more dangerous than that. He's not just saying, “Don't embarrass yourself." He's saying, "The whole game is rigged. Just stop playing."

Then, in case we miss it, he goes after the host. "When you throw a banquet," he says, “don't just invite your friends, relatives, and rich neighbors, because they can repay you. Invite the poor, the disabled, the blind, and the rest of the folks who get treated as though they were invisible. They can’t pay you back, but you ***will*** be repaid in God's economy."

That's not just advice about who to invite to Thanksgiving dinner. That's a frontal assault on how the ancient world ***worked***.

Banquets were engines of patronage. You fed people who could return the favor, who could owe you loyalty, who could advance your cause. Food wasn't just calories; it was currency. You bought friends with feasts. You purchased reputation with wine.

Jesus isn't just being ***kind*** here. He's being revolutionary. "Invite the people who ***can't*** pay you back." In other words, opt out of the system where everything is a transaction. Break the chain of *quid pro quo*. Stop reenacting the empire's seating chart.

If we're honest, we know this dynamic hasn't gone anywhere. We don't have triclinia couches like the Roman Empire, but we have boardrooms and cocktail parties and donor dinners. We still live in a world where people get ranked, sorted, filtered, and told, "Hey, you ... know your place."

We know how it works. You wear the right brand, get invited to the right table, and you move up. You live in the wrong neighborhood, or speak with the wrong accent, and you stay put.

And Jesus says, "That's not the world God desires."

In ***God's*** new world, the people nobody thinks to invite get the best seats. The honor flows not to the ones who claw their way up, but to the ones who sit down low and wait for God's voice to say, "Friend, move up higher."

Think about the absurdity. In a world obsessed with where you sit, Jesus says, "It doesn't matter. Take the lowest seat. Let God do the seating chart."

That's not a safe bit of social re-engineering for a Sabbath dinner. That's an insurrection. Because if God's the one who assigns the honor, then Caesar ***doesn't***—and Caesar doesn't like people who disagree, who refuse to bow down.

If the impoverished, the disabled, and the blind are at the head table, then the patronage system just lost its power.

That's why this passage isn't just remedial etiquette lessons. It's politics. It's economics. It's a war on a culture that thinks power and status should be able to do as they please.

And it's gospel.

Jerome Neyrey points out that in Jesus' day, honor wasn't a private ***feeling***. It was a public ***resource***. People competed for it like air. If you gained honor, somebody else lost it. So when Jesus tells people not to seek honor at the table, he's not only suggesting humility. He's ***destabilizing*** the entire economy of honor and shame.

Which makes me wonder. How much of our own anxiety comes from playing that same game? How many people are exhausted because they keep checking to see if they've been upgraded yet? If they're moving up the line, or sliding back?

Jesus says, "You don't have to play that game anymore." Your worth isn't determined by the seat you occupy or the company you keep. Your worth is determined by the God who keeps calling you "friend."

And when Jesus says to invite the poor, the disabled, and the blind, he's not tossing in a few social service points. He's evoking a vision where the reign of God is built on radical hospitality, where tables are full of people who could never afford the meal.

At Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls community imagined the messianic banquet as a dinner party that excluded the disabled, the blind, and those they believed to be less than whole. They treated disability as impurity. Jesus turns that on its head. He says, "Those are the ones you invite ***first***."

In other words, if your table looks like Qumran's, it doesn't look like God's. If your welcome to immigrants, to LGBTQ people, to

people of all races or ethnicities doesn't invite **everybody** to take a seat … it's not God's table

Which brings us back to ***us***. What do ***our*** tables look like? Who gets invited? Who gets ignored?

If I'm honest, I often curate my guest list the way everybody else does, with people who ***think*** like me, who can return the favor, who won't make dinner awkward. But Jesus says God's reign isn't found in dinner parties curated for comfort. It's found in messy tables where gratitude replaces reciprocity.

That's why communion matters so much. It's not a potluck where you bring what you can afford. It's a feast where you come hungry, and the bread is given to everybody. No repayment expected. No guest list checked at the door.

The church is supposed to be the community where the whole economy of "Hey, ***you***, stand over there" collapses.

Remember that word, interpellation? Well, Jesus ***re***-interpellates us. He hails us into a new identity. The world says, "Hey, you, know your place. Stay in your line. Climb if you can, but don’t forget your place in the pecking order."

But ***Jesus*** says, "Hey, you, friend. Come up higher."

And the difference between those two voices is life and death. One chains us to the anxiety of always proving ourselves. The other frees us to invite people who'll never be able to pay us back.

So what would it look like if we lived this out?

It’d look like neighborhoods where homeowners ***invite*** renters. Schools where kids who get free lunch sit at the ***head*** table. Churches where people on the margins don't just get charity, they get justice.

I think it'd look like budgets that stop hunting for quarters in the couch cushions when it comes to feeding the hungry, while writing blank checks for weapons and tax breaks for the folks who need them ***least***.

It'd look like communities where the poor aren't a problem to ***solve*** but guests of honor at the feast.

It'd look like us, reshaped by a God who refuses to let the empire tell us who we are.

At the end of the day, this story's ***about*** being told who you are. The world will keep telling you that you're economy class boarding, row 32, not a platinum club member. In other words, you don't belong up here.

But Jesus says, “You're not your boarding group. You're not your résumé. You're not your seat assignment. You’re a friend. You’re the guest of honor in God's house.”

And ***because*** that's true, we can stop fighting for the best seat. We can stop designing our lives around who can pay us back.

We can start living like God's new world has ***already*** arrived, like the feast has already been set, and the invitations have gone out to the poor, the blind, the disabled, and the rest of society's cast-offs.

And maybe, just maybe, when we stop fighting for a better seat, we'll finally discover that God’s already ***saved*** us a place … at the head of the table.

—Amen.