

Sermon given by John H. Kemp  
Pilgrim Congregational Church  
Duluth, Minnesota  
September 10, 1995

### A SURPRISING SABBATH DINNER

Luke 14:1-14

\*\*\*

Today the feast has been laid out for us - the feast of opportunities to grow in the spirit, in our understandings of our Scriptures, in our life as a church family of both oldtimers and newcomers sharing a journey of faith together.

But the aromas from downstairs remind us of another "feast" awaiting us shortly! *That* ties into our story from Luke's gospel. Our Pilgrim brunches are upbeat affairs - lots of fellowship and relaxation, good food and, of course, good company! You remember my "pitch" a few minutes ago to come downstairs and join us - it's a time to renew old friendships and make newcomers feel welcome in our family. Table-talk, I trust, will be friendly, informal, and enjoyable.

In the same way, Sunday dinner at home can be a festive meal. Perhaps you have some family or friends over, and it becomes one of those especially enjoyable times. We try to be good hosts; we don't go out of our way to pick fights or get into heavy arguments. Congenial - *that's* what we want to be! Oh, there's small talk, and some good conversation, too. We may even talk politics if we're comfortable about it. But nothing hostile, nothing too emotionally charged - at least *not* for Sunday dinner company!

Generally the bible deals with "company meals" the same way. Banquets and feasts are festive celebrations - times of thanksgiving for blessings of harvest or deliverance. Indeed, prophets like Amos and Micah got upset with them only when they became ends in themselves - when people thought those good times of fun and feasting were the *totality* of religious life, ignoring the ethical "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

Now, for a few moments, join the Sabbath dinner described by Luke - you'll find it most surprising. Here's this guest, Jesus, rudely ignoring the most basic rules of etiquette right before your eyes as he bluntly challenged his hosts on some very controversial issues. You immediately know you're sitting at anything *but* a friendly Sabbath meal brimming with congeniality!

But wait a minute: what's *really* going on here? Why did this Pharisee invite Jesus in the first place? He certainly wasn't having an old friend over. Was he just showing gracious hospitality to this traveling teacher new in town? Not likely. You can't really imagine these Pharisees being the least bit friendly to anyone they judged beneath them or outside their boundaries of propriety. And you know they'd been after Jesus, just waiting for a chance to get rid of him. Ah, maybe they invited



him to dinner just to bait him into a compromising situation! You look around, and it's obvious the "people are watching Jesus closely." *That* doesn't seem very cordial! It looks like they've put him into the position of being their guest, where he had to accept what they represented politely, or else appear an ill-mannered lout!

No, Jesus hardly came intending to break up a Sabbath dinner party. He too much enjoyed his Jewish tradition of festive meals. Here, however, he found himself surrounded by hostility, challenged by smug, self-righteous hosts who only wanted to entrap him. It *was* a most surprising Sabbath dinner - this itinerant teacher invited in the first place to break bread in that upper class home, filled with the town's elite, all suspiciously keeping a close eye on their guest.

Then who enters but another unexpected character, a poor fellow afflicted with dropsy. Now there's an *uninvited* guest, even *more* out of place than Jesus! By all rights, he should have been tossed right out! But before they could, an amazing thing happened: Jesus, the guest, took charge! "I can, I will, help this man, right here in this room."

However, teacher that he was, he saw another opportunity. Before he placed a healing hand on the intruder, he challenged his hosts: "Say, my friends, this person really needs our help *now*. What can we do for him? Does our Law allow us to heal him today, on the Sabbath, or not?" The icy silence was deafening. "They would not say a thing." Why should they? They knew work on the Sabbath was forbidden, and healing *was* work. No matter Jesus was helping someone. They were only concerned that again Jesus would brazenly break sacred law, this time, of all places, in the setting of their gracious hospitality. Now they'd have him trapped!

But Jesus had his own strategy. He appealed to their own tradition: "You say healing on the Sabbath is a terrible sin. Now, tell me, which of you, if your son fell into a well, wouldn't immediately pull *him* out on a Sabbath day?" Of course! If *my* boy fell down a well, you bet I'd be out there pulling him out, *any* day of the week! After all, mercy comes first - *that's* part of the law, too. Besides, *my* son? No question.

But Jesus wasn't through. To cinch his point, he pulled what must have been a great barb of humor: "Well, what if your *ox* fell into that well on the Sabbath?" Imagine the picture: that treasured, lumbering ox somehow stumbling over the low wall and down the well-shaft, certainly getting stuck part way down! You can bet your last shekel that owner would have every friend in that room out there, grunting and groaning, trying to pull his ox out of that hole! No doubt about it - mercy includes animals as well - especially valuable ones!

Again, stony silence. They didn't see the least bit of humor in that. After all, any answer they'd give would accept the legal truth of Jesus' claim that mercy came before the jot and tittle of Sabbath law. They'd have to admit that Sabbath healing was not only legally tolerable, it was the right and proper thing to do! But those folks weren't about to admit a thing: "My mind's made up - don't confuse me with the facts!"



Now before we get too judgmental about those Pharisees and smugly go down to enjoy *our* Sabbath brunch together, we might ponder what the passage says to *us*. Perhaps it's warning us against limiting Jesus to *our* expectations, *our* assumptions. Some good Christian folk find it tempting to use Jesus to justify *their* morality, the purity of *their* way which they'd impose on everyone. I doubt if Jesus would appreciate seeing himself "used" that way. He certainly wasn't about to let himself be "used" by his hosts at that Sabbath meal!

More important, wasn't Jesus insisting that the real heart of religion - of our quest for God - is not fulfilled in legalistic piety, not even in the fellowship of like-minded believers around a table, like those Pharisees? That's *not* saying prayer, meditation, worship were unimportant to him. They were fundamental. But if life isn't governed by basic principles grounded in respect for other and self and the world in which we're placed, all the other becomes so much pompous show, like the hypocrites praying on the streetcorner. Surely, he remarked, they have *their* reward!

You see, in our biblical faith, the spiritual is not something esoteric or otherworldly. We find its fulfillment right in the midst of life - in our relationships with others. *There* we most nearly experience God personally touch our lives. Sure, we marvel at God's awesome power and creativity out in nature; but we most nearly know the personal, loving touch of God as we touch and are touched by our fellow human beings with care and love, even as Jesus touched that hurting man trembling before him, a person no one at that dinner table felt belonged, no one, that is, except Jesus.

We gather in church to be together. Fellowship *is* fundamental to our life, as it was to Jesus. But in a distinctive context, as *God's* people, we come to worship and serve our God as we sing praises, offer our prayers, then go out those doors to live in the way of Jesus in the world beyond. We're not here to pat *our* backs, nor to worship *our* traditions; though we find value and good anchorage in those traditions and we do affirm our worth as children of God.

We're here to consciously include *God* in our lives, to give *God* our praise and thanks. We're here to grow in our understanding of what it means to be a people of God. Despite our shortcomings, we hold to the promise that we are accepted, we are loved, even as *we* tremble with our own fears and doubts and wounds, seeking that healing touch. And receiving it, we too, are blessed with the gift of new life, for *we* have been rediscovered!

We'll enjoy our Rediscovery brunch today, for sure. Can we know it as more than a catchy name for our first Sunday back? In a far deeper, richer sense, let it be *Christ's* invitation to you and to me to gather at his table, to be counted as his people. To God we give praise and glory, even as we sang with the choir. From this God we seek strength for the living of our days. God of grace, God of glory: on *thy* people pour thy power! Amen.