

“Girls, it’s time to set the table.”

That was the cue for me and my sister to stop doing homework, or whatever else was occupying us at the time, and get ready for dinner. Setting the table was our job. So was helping with the dishes. As I got older, mom asked me to be her sous chef. I guess these were the seeds of my event planning career.

Mom helped me appreciate the food and beverage section of event planning.

What I had to learn by doing was how to read a room.

- Where do I put the audiovisual equipment with a classroom set?
- Is there a vegetarian option for the banquet?

Once I began working for the disability association, those questions got more complicated.

- Is the dais ramped for the speaker who uses a wheelchair?
- Is the ASL interpreter able to be seen if the lights are lowered for the power point presentation?
- Are my print materials available in large-print, digital, and Braille?

This experience culminated in my writing the one and only book on accessible meetings in 1992 and unwittingly becoming a national presence in the meetings industry.

Ah. Those were the days.

That's all ancient history now. It was great while it lasted, but it's over. I had fun, but honestly it was stressful. More stressful than being a rector, if you can believe that. I used to beg the kitchen staffs at hotels to let me hide there and de-stress for a few minutes before going back into the fray. So, these days I'm happy to cook for the youth group, and the staff, and set the Lord's table at Redeemer.

The rest of the stuff has been relegated to memories.

I can still read a room, though. I can tell in an instant who's welcome and who isn't.

So could Jesus.

Oh yes, Jesus definitely could read a room. And he was not happy with what he saw at this dinner table. People were jostling to get their place next to the host, the place of honor. Perhaps this was in order to boast their importance.

Perhaps it was to be sure they were next in line to be the host.

Those who sat furthest away would either not be asked to reciprocate this hospitality or could not afford to. How shameful it was to not have the resources to run with the big dogs, but only eat from what was left at the end of the chow line.

So, Jesus tells a story of a prominent man who asks the people at the end of the table to “come up higher.” Can’t you just see those Pharisees go pale? That would be a social disaster. How could this rabbi say something like that.

Then, Jesus says the 1st century equivalent of “hold my beer.”

“Invite people who can’t reciprocate,” he says.

“Invite blind people. Invite lame people. Honor them like you honor your Pharisaical peers. Better yet, bring them up to sit at the head of the table with you. Make them your equals. Humble yourselves.”

Humble yourselves.

Humble is a funny word. The understanding of it can run the gamut between gentle self-deprecation to forced groveling. It comes from the Latin word that means 'earth' or 'ground'. So, to be humble refers to being 'down to earth' or 'grounded'. Humble people know their place in a good way. They know their strengths and their weaknesses. They can be with others who are better at things than they are because they are comfortable with who they are. Humble people aren't easily "put in their place" by others.

Humble people invite to their banquets people whom others feel are undeserving. They don't worry if the person can't invite them back because that's not the point of the invitation. Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees was about changing their perspective in order to change the social order.

The lame and blind people were on the level with the elite in God's eyes. Frankly, there are no elite in God's eyes. God fills the head table at the heavenly banquet. We all fill in and move on a lower tier.

Jesus is calling out his peers for making the institution more important than some of God's beloved children.

Who is welcome? Who is tacitly unwelcome?

I've personally discovered that a 1950s rectory sends the message to prospective future rectors that they (and their families) should be "young and able-bodied." Is that the message you'll wish to communicate in 2031, when the 8th Rector of Redeemer is called?

We say we welcome diversity. The staff tries hard to depict that diversity in our marketing materials, our concert series, and our leadership. We are getting there. But, I believe this neighborhood has more diversity than our pews reflect. What else can we do to project that message of welcome?

Over the next week, take time to think about the rooms in which you live, move, and have your being. At home. At work. And, especially here at church.

Our conversation on September 8th, and our work with our consultant, will help us discern what this building is telling the outside world about us. It will then be up to us to discern whether we want *that* message to stand.

While we do this, we dare not forget that Jesus can read a room. Amen.