Read: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Have you ever played 'Lifeboat'? We played it a lot at Primary School. We would line up at the front of the class and have to explain to the rest of the class why we deserved a place on the lifeboat. The class would then vote, and we would see who made it. Normally our arguments for inclusion involved our jobs. My crowning glory, which I still remember well, was when I claimed I was the Queen and therefore deserved a place in the lifeboat. Due to the persuasive power of making my classmates laugh, I was voted into the lifeboat that day.

*In life, do we make judgements of people based on our perception of their value?*

*What influences that perception of their value?*

*If there were only two places left in the lifeboat, and there was a doctor, a janitor, a teacher, a rubbish collector, an unemployed person, a handicapped person, and a report writer, who would you vote into the lifeboat?*

## Where are we in Luke

We are still in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:27), or the Gospel of the Outcast (see last week's notes). We mentioned the presence of reversal themes: where 'humble "outsiders" receive blessings or commendation, while prideful "insiders" suffer rebuke or loss'[1], and these are present in today's passage.

## Context

This chapter starts off with the male counterpart to the miracle in Luke 13:10-17, another healing on the Sabbath. Jesus is at a Pharisee's house for a meal, on the Sabbath. The pharisees were watching him closely, no doubt expecting Jesus to do something they deemed questionable. Jesus doesn't disappoint. He again heals on the Sabbath, using a similar argument to 13:15-16 to justify his actions here.
This dinner party is also the setting for the utterances that follow. One commentary titled this whole section (14:1-24) as 'Jesus, a disturbing Guest'[2]; not only has Jesus healed on the Sabbath again; he then proceeds to challenge his host and the other guests with three parables, the first two being in this week's lectionary reading. All three of the parables/parabolic utterances revolve around dinners, hosts and guests.

## Luke 14:7-11 - Instructions to Guests

Luke introduces this pericope as a parable, and that should give us a clue that Jesus is not just talking about our behaviour at dinner parties.

[1] Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 274.
[2] Justo L. González, J. L. *Luke* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2010), 178.

Cultural Background

In an honor-shame culture, as first century Galilee and Judea were, one protected and lived out one's status.[3]

Seating order at feasts or in synagogues is an important signal of the relative status of the guests or worshipers.[4]

The higher one's honor the closer one sat to the host; the lower one's honor the farther one sat away from the host. A meal put people in their place by a recognized pecking order.[5]

Seating custom varied from culture to culture and even within cultures. For example, later Judaism spoke of a U-shaped table with a three-person couch located on each prong of the table. The host sat at the bottom of the U; the most honored seat would be to the left and the next honored seat would be to the right. In any culture, the seats by the host were the seats of honor.[6]

## Questions

*How do we decide who gets invited, who sits where, at a dinner party?*
*How does our society assign social rank?*
*In NZ we pride ourselves as being a classless society. Is this still true? Was it ever true?*
*Does where we live affect our social ranking?*
*Does how we dress, how we speak get a different reaction at the doctors? On the plane? At a coffee shop? Have you ever been in a queue and seen other people get different treatment than you?*

The advice Jesus gives in verse 7-11 is similar to advice given in the First Testament (and Apocrypha) wisdom literature. Jesus is reminding the Pharisees of something they should already know and practice.

Proverbs 25:6–7 (NIV)
6 Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great;
7 for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

[3] Scott McKnight, *Luke*, New Testament Everyday Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HarperChristian Resources., 2023), 226.
[4] D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* ( InterVarsity Press , 2012), 31.
[5] McKnight, 227.
[6] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1262-1263.

Sirach 3:17–20[7] (NIV)
17 My child, perform your tasks with humility; then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.
18 The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself; so you will find favor in the sight of the Lord.
20 For great is the might of the Lord; but by the humble he is glorified.

In verse 9, as the guests arrive, Jesus noticed how they chose their places. Jesus observed what their choices reveal about them. However, …

the one who issued the invitations has the final say about the ranking of his guests. This is the basis for the parabolic application of the advice. There is a correlation between promoting oneself before others and promoting oneself before God[8]

The parable, then, isn't so much good advice for social occasions—though no doubt, within Jesus' world and beyond, there is practical human wisdom in the warning against pride and arrogance. The real meaning is to be found in the warning against pushing oneself forward in the sight of God. In Jesus' day it was all too easy for the well-off and the legally trained to imagine that they were superior in God's sight to the poor, to those without the opportunity to study, let alone practise, the law.[9]

## Questions

*Do we assume that God thinks more highly of us than we actually are? How does the practice of confession help with this?*
*What does false humility look like?*

In verse 11 we have the reversal theme: the humble are exalted and the exalted are humbled - the interchange of humble and exalted standing.

Beyond the meaning of our humility before God, Kraybill also applies the need for humility and a change of priorities to the life of a disciple in the Upside-Down kingdom. …[10]

What does this riddle on humility mean? Jesus doesn't intend it to teach dining etiquette. Our normal tendency is to pursue positions of honor. Enjoying the ohs and ahs of other people, we take it for granted that upward is better. Rather than endorsing such upward flight, Jesus calls us to downward mobility. He asks us to take

[7] Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach is a book from what we call the Apocrypha, or Catholics refer to as Deuterocanonical.
[8] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34,* WBC 35B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1193), 749
[9] T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (SPCK, 2004), 175.
[10] This term has been used since, but it was Kraybill that first wrote on in his book; *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, first published in 1978, which explores how the values of God's kingdom contrast with worldly values.

the seats at the bottom. His disciples defer to others, happily yielding up the good seats. They're so busy waiting on tables, in fact, that they have little time to sit. Serving, not jockeying for seats, is their occupation. Those who exalt themselves will have a backseat in the kingdom. Those who confess their pride and quietly serve others are exalted in the upside-down kingdom.[11]

### Questions

*What ladders of social stratification are important in your community? In your congregation?*
*Who gets the most attention? Who gets the most respect? Who has the most say/influence in decisions that affect the whole community?*
*In what specific ways does your congregation embody flat kingdom ideals (ie: the lack of hierarchy, or at least less levels of hierarchy)?*
*Identify specific ways to pursue flat principles in your work, congregation, and community.*[12]

### For personal reflection

*What steps can you take to lessen the importance of position, title, or other status symbols in your life?*[13]
*Does being humble indicate you have low self-esteem?*

## Luke 14:12-14 - Instructions to Hosts

Having addressed the behaviour of guests, Jesus now turns his attention to hosts.

All kinds of meals are in view here, lunch, dinner and banquet.[14]

**Reciprocity in the ancient world**

It is widely recognized that one of the fundamental principles of Greek social relations, both among humans and in the relationship between humans and gods, was the expectation of reciprocity in gifts, favors and "good turns."58 Hesiod's advice on this matter seems well tuned to the everyday lives of farmers:

[11] Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom,* Revised Ed. (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1990), 247.
[12] Kraybill, 254.
[13] Some questions in this study taken from *Adult Questions for LESSONmaker* (Lk 14:1–14), (Logos, 2024).
[14] All kinds of meals are in view here: ἄριστον (ariston) refers to a late morning or noon meal; δεῖπνον (deipnon) is the main meal, late afternoon or evening; δοχὴ (dochē) is a reception or banquet. Bock, 1265-1266. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Anchor Bible, 19851047.

> Invite your friend, but not your enemy,
> to dine; especially be cordial to
> your neighbour, for if trouble comes at home,
> a neighbour's there, at hand…. Measure carefully
> when you must borrow from your neighbour, then,
> pay back the same, or more, if possible,
> and you will have a friend in time of need. (Works and Days 342-351)[15]

Luke isn't saying here, never invite your friends. μὴ φώνει (mē phonei, do not invite) 'depicts a habitual invitation and has the force of a command not to do this exclusively.'[16] The Semitic form of this type of saying means, don't just do that but also do this.[17]

Note the list of types of people we are told to invite. This is the same list as 14:21, the list of those who will be invited to the Kingdom banquet. Note in particular that the last three were excluded from the Temple (Leviticus 21:17), and also from the Qumran community.[18]

> Proverbs 19:17 (NIV)
> Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.

Standard patterns of reciprocity and concern for those of our own standing are overturned here. The directions for hosts correspond to the directions to guests in vv 7–11, and in turn these directions to hosts are to be found to have their counterpart in the behavior of the divine host, hidden in the parable of vv 15–24.
The natural guest list is made up of people whose company one enjoys, along with relatives, and those from whom one stands to gain in some way. We are told here to rewrite that guest list for fear that it might give us precisely what it has been drawn up to provide: a reciprocal benefit from our generosity. This cannot lead to God's blessing on the day of accountability.
Such a guest list needs to be replaced by a list consisting of the people who would never be our natural guests, and who have no capacity to return the favor. Then our hospitality will express true generosity of soul and will be like God's own generosity, extended to the most unlikely of people.[19]

## Questions

*Why is it a blessing to invite those who cannot repay?*
*What is something special you can do this week for someone who is unable to repay you in kind?*

[15] John M. G. Barclay, Paul & The Gift (Grand Rapids, Michigan:Eerdmans, 2015), 24.25.
[16] Bock, 1265
[17] The Semitic idiom "not x … but y" means "not so much x … but y". Bock, 1265
[18] Bock, 1266.
[19] Nolland , 751.

More from *The Upside Down Kingdom* about status

Clamoring after status wasn't only a Pharisee problem. It also snared the disciples. One day they began arguing about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-34). Peter felt he should be number one since he was the first to understand Jesus was the Messiah. James and John, however, thought they should be first because they had seen the transfiguration. James and John were so anxious about their status that they pulled Jesus aside and pleaded, "Do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mark 10:35). They wanted to sit in the best seats, on the right- and left-hand side of Jesus, in his kingdom. Matthew reports that their mother encouraged their request (Matthew 20:20-21). In any event, we find the old autocratic spirit of "do this and do that" in the midst of the disciples. The bossing mentality ranks people from greatest to least. Jesus rebuked their clamoring for status and power by taking a child in his arms. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37). _ A few days later, as the disciples were screening visitors, they pushed aside children who wanted to touch Jesus. He was furious with this power play (Mark 10:13- 14).3 To the disciples, these children were social nobodies. They held no prominent positions. They wouldn't help the cause. Jesus should spend his time with influential folks. The children would divert Jesus from his mission.

The disciples still 'hadn't absorbed the upside-down logic. To Jesus, children were as important as adults. He not only spent time with these little ones, he held them up as model kingdom citizens. "For to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:14, 15). As the disciples vied for status and pushed children away, Jesus used a child to symbolize kingdom living. 242 / The Upside-Down Kingdom Typically we tell people to grow up and 1/act their age." Jesus reverses the logic. He tells us to grow down and regress to childlike behavior. Why is this? How can children instruct kingdom learners? Why does Jesus go to the very bottom of the social ladder for an example? Children rank low in status and power. Totally dependent on others, they're economic liabilities. Children make few social distinctions. They don't put others in boxes. They haven't learned to play by adult social rules. They're friendly to strangers before their parents tell them how dumb that is. They haven't yet learned racist and ethnic slurs. Color, nationality, title, and sexual boxes mean little to the young. They have no sense of bureaucratic structures and hierarchies.[20]

[20] Kraybill, 240-242.