

Jesus' Inclusion Sermon | Luke 14:1,7-14; Heb. 13:1-8, 15-16 | LUMC | 8, 28, 2022
By Grace Kanake

Dear church family and friends: Last week St Luke informed us that Jesus healed a lady on a Sabbath, and the religious leaders were unhappy. During that healing the Pharisees' lawyers were present. One of those lawyers decided to invite Jesus for dinner as a set-up. The host invited a man with dropsy to the dinner party; they wanted to see if Jesus would again heal on a Sabbath. Jesus was aware that his every move was being watched, this time by the Jewish religious leaders and Pharisees' legal professionals. These two teams were trying to find a cause to arrest Jesus, but he was not deterred by their charges. At the dinner, Jesus healed the man with dropsy and preached an inclusive sermon.

Again, Jesus was moved by compassion and felt morally and spiritually obligated to heal another person, this time a man with abnormal bodily swelling (dropsy (or edema in modern science) is the retention of fluid in tissues, often involving the legs or arms). Jesus healed this person in front of Jewish experts in law—the Pharisees. Before performing the healing miracle, Jesus turned to the legal experts to ask what law is broken by healing a man suffering edema. The experts kept quite; they did not point to any wrongdoing. Or, perhaps they lacked moral courage to challenge Jesus. Jesus healed the man and sent him away to avoid him being the evening's center of focus.

So, if we may ask, in last week's and this week's healing, what did Jesus do wrong? The religious leaders maintained that Jesus broke the Sabbath law twice by healing sick people, that is, healing on the Sabbath, an official act of business.

Let us observe the type of people healed and the type of people complaining. The healed people were the "the low life" and those complaining were from the "classic life"—the cream of the crop of Jewish society. During Jesus' time society was divided into two major groups: those with means to meet their needs and those unable to completely meet even daily needs. Those two groupings were found in all races. The poor people were hunters and shepherds and practiced a little farming but, the rich people kept big farms and business. Yet love was not shared across the board. It's no surprise that those social divisions exist even today.

Jesus identified with people who had no voice and no means to better their lives. He was often moved to tears by the pain the poor endure (people we call today social misfits, the down-and-out). Jesus was and is concerned with the mistreatment poor people suffer. The high-class people then and now made money from the sweat of the underprivileged; they oppressed them with laws for self-gain.

Jesus' inclusive sermon at that time and now seeks for society to reform oppressive laws and accord every person an opportunity for self-existence. The younger generation may not understand the oppressive culture that went underground after passage of the civil rights laws in 1969. Because we live in a stratified social set-up, and because we are highly influenced by individualistic culture, it's not easy to identify with the people Jesus is speaking of. Yet these people exist. They need of our support.

Jesus offers another way we can improve our social system, and that is through party invitations and the seating arrangements. In the sermon, Jesus observed party attendants occupying seats without waiting to be seated. He taught a lesson on humility and honor by asking guests to wait to be seated. Otherwise, they might be embarrassed by being asked to move to a seat elsewhere. In some cultures in today's world, those who humble themselves are assumed to be uninformed or naïve and to some extent thought of as lacking ability to self-express or go to bat for themselves. Jesus' sermon is counter-cultural and should not be taken lightly. Humility is a great virtue often being practiced by genuine Christians although out of touch with mainstream society of our day. Jesus summarized the topic on humility this way, "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted".

Jesus turned to scrutinize the host's conduct by means of his invitation. He challenged him because of the caliber of guests invited. The guests were all from his class standing except the sick person who Jesus healed and sent away. Jesus knew the sick man was a set-up; he belonged to the low-life; he would not normally have been invited.

In the sermon, Jesus asked the host to not only invite friends, relatives, siblings, and the rich neighbors. Instead, he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. He said to invite people with no strings attached. These people had no means to repay the host. But God will bless the hosts who show acts of mercy to everyone. They shall be rewarded with eternal life.

St Paul added another twist by including strangers into the family of God, with equal rights like other family members. At the time of St Paul Christianity had spread beyond the territory of the Jews, and cities were becoming cosmopolitan with people from different regions of the ancient world. There were Jews, Greeks, Assyrians, Arabs and Africans. St Paul witnessed open hatred and mistreatment toward the foreigners. He preached the same inclusive sermon of welcoming the stranger, to bringing everyone into peaceful coexistence. The message then is the same message today: recognizing and respecting our differences, discussing those differences in person and celebrating the differences as the means to strength, not weakness.

St Paul advocated a genuine invitation to influence each other with kindness and civility. The same love for the stranger should be extended to those in prison and those in pain of any kind. St Paul asks that we identify with those in prison, not by supporting their bad decision that led them to prison, but feeling their pain of isolation and remorse if they want to be forgiven.

Jesus and St Paul are radically changing our way of life, striking at the core of our being. They both ask us to invite undesirables to our parties and to share space with those we genuinely fear because of who they are and what the system has made them to be. How can we practically share our homes, our space? Where are these people?

In some societies these people are visible. Should we go into cities' streets to invite those people to come to our parties? My goal is to consider the poor when I am

preparing for a party (any party, including birthdays), and offer a designated gift on Sunday or stop to hand my gift to those standing by the roadside. In other words, those who really appear genuinely needy. Often though I worry if my gift is going to facilitate those on drugs. I PRAY to God to help the person to make good use of the gift I offer.

We experience Jesus' and Paul's courage when speaking for the people with less opportunity in society. Jesus was aware his radical view would not be accepted easily. Nevertheless, Jesus was less bothered by those looking over his shoulder. He continued his ministry unabated.

Jesus and Paul present key points for inclusive mission. These are points to pay attention to: mutual love, hospitality to strangers, welcoming everyone to God's way. Aware that God will extend blessings to us, Rahab was blessed for her moral and spiritual courage when she hid "strangers from being killed".

Jesus is reminding us to always use respectful names when addressing strangers in this country. My faith does not allow me to use demeaning general terminology to describe foreigners, like undocumented—aliens—thieves—or law breakers. These nick-names carry racial and political implications that Christians of faith want to avoid. We are all the same humans in the eyes of God. Mutual love is a Christian virtue, and Jesus and Paul emphasize loving without ceasing.

When we allow Jesus to influence our daily lives, he will make us uncomfortable as he did the legal experts, party-goers and the party host. Jesus appears to "poke his nose" in every aspect of our lives, from mental decisions, money management, single or married life, and casual or adventurous life. He does not stand still when things are not going right. He does not miss any chance to correct an abnormality. He does not say, "Let this issue rest and die naturally". He wants reformation, and genuine forgiveness is not sweeping an issue under the rug.

Psychologists say that an unconcluded issue in the mind poses future mental health concerns. Such issues revive again affecting the subconscious level of the brain. We can lie to others but not to our consciousness—God. Trauma becomes a mental sickness when the issue is not solved in a healthy way. Jesus says the cleanest soap for any evil-doing to self or others is "forgiveness". We shall find ourselves often dealing with the unforgiven issues generations over.¹ The inclusive sermon Jesus is offering should also influence us at the personal level and make us realize what we need to deal with, and ask others through Christ to so forgive. Amen.

¹ Do not look far, listen to dementia patients and decode their cries. Most of what comes out of their minds are past unresolved issues. We should not always define everything they say as illness. Let us be bold and deal with our issues while we have good health. Christ only can influence our daily lives for a good cause. Amen.