

*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

*7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

If you want your church to grow, it helps if it is homogenous.

All the same - homogenous.

That is what the church growth experts say.

People want to be in a church where there are people like themselves - people who live in houses like their house - people who drive cars and dress in clothes like theirs - people who play the same games, listen to the same music, watch the same shows as they do.

That makes sense to me. When I am among a group of strangers I look for someone with whom I have something in common. Conversation is easier, interesting for me. I feel more at home.

If we want this church to grow, we should concentrate on one slice of the population and tailor all the programs and worship and music to them.

That's what the experts say.

Go for people like us.

I think that is what the Pharisees were up to that day. A leader of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to eat at his house. A dinner party for a homogenous group - Pharisees. The question that day was: Is Jesus qualified to be one of us? We read they were watching him closely.

Pharisees were particular. They would not eat with people who were defiled, that is ritually unclean. They would not eat with common people - gentiles, sinners.

The first thing Jesus did was to heal a man who had swelling from abnormal fluid retention. It was the sabbath. The Pharisees said nothing but we sense their silence was certainly not approval.

Secondly, Jesus told the other guests to seek the lowest seat when they were invited to a wedding banquet. Then the host would invite them to take a higher place and they would be honored.

Then Jesus spoke to the host: *“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

I suppose that advice that Jesus gave that day may have been for those people and for that day only - for Pharisees living in the first century, but not for us. Certainly I know that we do not follow Jesus' words when it comes to our entertaining.

But maybe Jesus words have to do first with here, in this place as we gather in his body. What he said to the Pharisee, he is also saying to us.

There are a lot of empty seats here today. Who could we bring in to fill them? Who in your life needs to hear the word of God? Do you know anyone who is poor? If not, maybe it is time to move out beyond the boundaries of your life.

Are there people in nursing homes who could be brought here to worship? Sister Anne at our Lady of the Wayside hopes some of the residents there will one day be able to worship here with us. That would mean noise - maybe interruption during our worship. What do you think Jesus would say about that?

This isn't our church. This isn't my church, or your church. This is Christ's church. I don't think that our call as a church is to be successful, or to grow, or to make sure that our financial future is secure. Our call is to follow where our Lord is leading. That is not an easy path.

Soon the Pharisees who were breaking bread with Jesus would be shouting for the breaking of his body. They wanted their homogenous group; they wanted God to be what they wanted God to be.

The great temptation of our time is to gather here thinking that God should be what we want God to be, rather than gathering to be made into what God wants us to be.

Jesus died for you, was raised for you that through faith in him we might be God's new creation. Rich and poor, athletic and crippled, black and white, male and female, blind and seeing, God wants us all gathered here, the one body of our one Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus gathers you here in that one body not to be served but to serve. Each and every one of you is host in this place, inviting, providing, serving. We gather not for entertainment but that Christ might be loving and serving and giving through us.

We are his body.