

“Meeting Jesus at the Table: Making Room”
Luke 14:7-14

Which scenario is more fun?

1. You get to go to your favorite spot on the earth, and spend a week eating your favorite meals, and getting pampered.
2. You get to serve meals at a homeless shelter with your friends.

The answer depends on which kind of happiness you are seeking. According to neuroscience, there are two types of happiness. Neurosurgeon and author Dr. James Doty lists them this way:

- **Self-Focused Happiness:** This type of happiness is often linked to achieving personal goals, accumulating possessions, or seeking external validation. This is transitory in nature. One is often stuck trying to get to the next goal, experience, or purchase. “In most cases, this pursuit fails to deliver the sense of a good life in the long term.”
- **Compassion-Based Happiness:** This type of happiness comes from focusing on the well-being of others, practicing empathy, connecting with others, and contributing to something larger than oneself. Doty believes that this approach fosters genuine happiness and a sense of purpose.

What is fascinating about this is that even our bodies react differently to these two types of happiness. When we are focused on living a meaningful life through relationships and compassion, our bodies become more adept at fighting inflammation and disease, while “the people who reported high levels of happiness but little to no sense of meaning had the same genetic pattern expressed by people who are facing chronic adversity such as grief or loneliness. Their bodies, although frequently enjoying experiences of physical pleasure, were genetically disposed to inflammation...pleasurable experiences without meaning...make the body feel like it’s been facing chronic adversity.”

Because self-focused happiness sells better, we often fall into the trap of believing it is the way to true happiness. We all need the basics of life such as food, shelter, relaxation, and health, but beyond a certain point more food and more luxury or fun experiences fail to help us live a truly happy life. A meaningful life on the other hand, is about living aligned with values of love, compassion, and connection. I am always grateful for the gift of faith because it helps us to see the illusions of life with clarity.

In our Bible reading for today from the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus giving instructions to people about the compassion-based happiness. Jesus was at the house of a pharisee for a Sabbath meal. And just before the reading for today, there was an incident of something that religious leaders didn’t approve of. Jesus had just healed someone on the Sabbath. In an effort to keep the Sabbath holy as God had commanded them, the religious leaders of Jesus’ faith and time, put heavy burdens on

the people. Even healing or helping someone in need became a problem, for fear of breaking the rules. Jesus knew that he was being watched and criticized about his views of the world. He wanted the people to go back to the heart of the faith which was about mercy. He knew that the heart of God was about mercy and compassion instead of self-focused piety.

Let's listen to Luke 14:7-14

When 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; ⁹ and 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. ¹⁰ But 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. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

He 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. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

In the context of a meal, Jesus noticed how people chose carefully where to sit so that their status would be elevated. Prestige and place of honor at the table have always been connected. The higher one's social status is, the more prominent their position is.

Jesus wanted the people to learn the wisdom of finding our true place of honor based on compassion and connection. On the surface, we may think that true honor is about status and power. Sitting in the seats of honor or inviting people who are so-called "deserving" of honor are often presented as the way to elevate one's status. But Jesus offers us the wisdom of the heart which knows that true happiness is about being connected to others instead of feeling superior to them or only including those who are considered important or worthy in our gatherings.

Cynthia Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr put it this way, "Jesus' parable of the dinner party...raises the dangers of *transactional relationships*...Transactional relationships are those relationships based on quid pro quo...Jesus is inviting them to move from *transactional relationships* to *transformational relationships*. To move from survival-based, get-what-I-need kinds of relationships, to table-turning, 'reign of God' kinds of relationships."

Writer and teacher Mark Labberton talks about the difference between circumstantial happiness and deep joy in the context of Christians in the global south, where the circumstance of life are difficult but people still live happy. (video from the work of the people)

This move from self-focused to compassion-based happiness sometimes takes a lifetime for us because the cultural influences around us are often so powerful. We look at influencers and celebrities and see a model of happiness that is the envy of the world with luxury, beauty, and self-gratification. But God does not leave us alone to let go of this illusion. God sends us inspiration and inner strength to discover the true source of peace and happiness in life.

Campbell and Fohr write, "Jesus tells us that we are invited to more. We are invited to root our relationships in faith and love and, more than anything, in trust -trust in the God who can open our doors and expand our tables, who can free us from worrying about how we will be compensated or what will be offered in return."

Our world is founded by God upon abundance and reciprocity. Fear gives us the illusion that we need to take for ourselves as much as we can.

In 2014, Pope Francis shared 10 steps or secrets to happiness:

- **"Live and let live."**
- **"Be giving of yourself to others."**
- **"Proceed calmly" in life.**
- **Have "a healthy sense of leisure."**
- **"Sundays should be holidays." Spend Sundays with family and friends.**
- **"Create dignified jobs for young people."**
- **"Respect and take care of nature."**
- **"Stop being negative."**
- **"Respect others' beliefs."**
- **"Work for peace."**

Notice how all of them are focused on compassion to self and to others. They are not about getting things, but instead about learning to value all of life. Making room for others at the table of life is at the essence of who God created us to be.

Allow the Holy Spirit to bring to your attention a recent experience of being deeply connected to life, to God, to yourself, and to others. Invite the Holy Spirit to connect you to the deep source of your joy through your connection to God, to others, and to Christ at his table. Amen.