

You've probably all been to some sort of banquet. Maybe a wedding dinner...or a work-related banquet. Maybe a formal banquet of an organization you've been a part of or contributed to. Daryl's position in the National Guard sometimes took us to some pretty fancy dinners.

In fact, in the military, there are entire courses that deal with how to conduct yourself at formal dinners. The one I went to was called Dining with Diplomats. You learn how to navigate the dizzying array of silverware and the proper way to cut your meat and lay down your knife and fork. Hint – it's different depending on what country you're in.

The most helpful tip, and one our whole family still uses, is how to tell which water or wine glass is yours and which bread is yours. If you ever want to know I'll share the secret.

You also learn the proper seating chart – where the host is seated, where the honored guest is seated and the second honored and so on. The dinners I was at were always very congenial and nobody got upset over who was seated where.

And at the most formal one I remember, the seats were assigned. But you might imagine what could happen in a room full of rivals – those trying to make an impression or win some sort of favor. They might all be jockeying for that place of honor.

At most banquets, people all dress a particular way, too. Formal, semi-formal, and so on. If you walked into a typical banquet, there wouldn't be much to shock you.

The fact is, most of the banquets and dinners we get invited to are made up of people much like us. Weddings with lots of family and friends, teammates and families at a sports banquet, well-heeled folks at a fund-raising gala. You pretty much get a typical image in your head of each type of banquet.

Now imagine walking into a very different kind of banquet. A banquet more like the banquet in Jesus' second parable. The banquet hall is huge.

The first thing you notice is there's no assigned seating or even apparently reserved tables. Yet nobody is arguing over where to sit.

And the people...there are black and brown and white from every possible ethnic background. There are people in tuxes and formal gowns. There are people in t-shirts and ripped up jeans. There are people in wheelchairs and on crutches and blind people with a cane or service dog.

There are children and old people. There are queer people and straight people. There are some very important looking people – leaders in the government perhaps or corporate tycoons. There are athletes and entertainers.

There are black rappers and hip-hop artists and country music stars and classic rockers with big hair and white opera singers. There are farmers and inner city residents.

And you notice something even stranger – not only is there no seating assignment, but people are seated in the most unlikely groupings. And they appear to be enjoying themselves.

There's a black rapper talking music to a country music star. There's a young person whose gender you can't quite identify holding an animated conversation with a CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

There's a member of a motorcycle gang making room for someone in a wheelchair at the table. There's a man who's been living at the city mission sharing smiles and photos with a suburban mom.

Some of the children are laughing and running around. Others are sitting quietly with an autistic boy and letting him be who he is.

Everyone is welcome. Everyone is enjoying the company of their table mates, no matter how different they may be.

That's the banquet Jesus puts before us as the ideal.

That image of this banquet operates on several levels. First, it is an image of the heavenly banquet when we dine in the eternal presence of Christ.

But Jesus is never only talking about some far-off time and place called heaven.

The banquet also mirrors Jesus' own practices – he himself was criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners. He even invited them to follow him!

This image – presented at a Pharisee's dinner – is also meant to be a critique...a challenge...to the status quo. It's a critique of the Roman imperial system of patronage.

That system is one of power jockeying and favors done to enhance one's position. It's a system of hierarchy that puts a few at the top and many at the bottom. In that patronage system, where you sat at a dinner defined who you were and what you were worth.

Ash Wednesday begins a season that has traditionally been one of repentance. It is a season when we look honestly at our world and our own lives in light of Jesus' teachings of the kingdom. It's a time of facing the ways we fall short of living in the kingdom of God as Jesus imagined it.

It's a time to be honest about our own reactions to the people at the banquet. Who would we rather not see there? Who are we afraid to sit with?

Are we ready to accept the invitation to such a banquet? Are we ready to just be in fellowship with God's people, no matter how different they are from us?

Let's say we are.

So we head back into the banquet hall. We go just as we are. We don't feel the need to change or dress up or make ourselves look better than we're worried we really are.

More people have joined from all parts of society and from every imaginable background.

And oh, the food!

The whole scene is the one described by the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

<sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the covering that is spread over all nations;

<sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

The exotic aromas fill the banquet hall. The clinking of glasses can be heard and silence fills the hall.

The host stands up in the middle of the people.

He lifts up a loaf of bread, breaks it and says, this is my body given for you.

And then he took a cup and said, this is my blood shed for you.