

## “Revisiting the Guest List”

Luke 14:1, 7-14  
Richard C. Allen  
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South Glastonbury  
Connecticut

Jesus had an uncanny way of shaking up the status quo; shaking up the way his community thought about things such as guest lists. He saw that when his neighbors were planning a feast to celebrate some occasion their guest lists had an exclusive feel to them. They tended to include only those who could afford to return the favor at some future time. His suggestion that his neighbors take a different tact in generating their guest lists must have been met with huge resistance and perhaps some anger. His words speak directly to my own heart. “Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.” Thus, he invites a whole new interpretation to what it means to be blessed.

What I see in Jesus’ parable is an invitation to taste the sweetness of diversity. The lame one may not be able to return the favor of an invitation to a lavish party, but may well be able to share a kind of wisdom that is life-giving in ways that hadn’t been imagined. The one who is poor may never be able to reciprocate the invitation to high tea, but may have found a faith that holds the potential of healing a troubled heart. The one who is blind may not have the means to throw a big shindig, but she may have a song to sing that brings awe and wonder to a neighbor’s heart.

What Jesus knows is that our lives are enriched spiritually when we open the door to diversity. Everyone who has visited our Syrian refugee family has made this discovery! They have no fluency in English, but they have souls that trust their new neighbors. They don’t have a vehicle, but Mohamed’s work ethic would make Henry Ford smile.

They may not have a Roth IRA or a 401K, but everyone who stops in for a friendly visit receives a little piece of candy, a gesture of grateful hospitality.

Jesus knows the spiritual food that comes with embracing diversity. His band of disciples includes fishermen who probably never went to school, a tax collector who likely had an advanced degree in Mathematics, and some farmers whose classrooms were the fields and orchards where they planted grain and harvested olives. His own circle of intimate friends included women of all ages, lepers, Judeans and Samaritans, guitar players and retired military personnel. It's this fullness of diversity that leads him to invite his community to revisit their guest lists. They're missing something! They are missing a blessing! By inviting only those who can return the favor, they are cheating themselves out of the fullness of God's blessing.

The four of us traveling to Malawi next week have already received a number of invitations. It is unlikely we'll ever be able to return the favor. In a way, the tables have been reversed! We are the ones on the receiving end of the invitations! I know we will be blessed. I trust that our hosts and hostesses will also be blessed.

We have an invitation to visit the home of Martha Chikatiko. Martha has four children and she has a singing voice that absolutely sends goose bumps up and down one's spine. She promises she'll have all four of us singing along with her children. And she'll teach us the hand motions that accompany the words. She will send us home with a new CD she has just produced for spreading the Word of God in her village. But it's her smile that will melt us; her warmth that will change us.

We have an invitation from the women's support group in Chipoka. These are the women who have received micro loans from our South Church Endowment Fund for Mission. They have left behind their previous business of selling themselves, and have used the loans to start legitimate businesses. They are making way more money now than they ever did before. One woman makes scones and sells them. One buys and sells used clothing. One sells small packets of salt for cooking. We are invited to hear their stories of transformation. Their dignity has been restored. They have found their self-respect again. They are living now in the greatest of hope. I don't know how we could ever return this invitation. They are allowing us into their lives for an afternoon. We will be forever changed by their welcome.

We have an invitation to visit the home of Mr. and Mrs. Chagwa. Their village is reached by trekking through groves of baobab trees and fording the Lilongwe River. Mrs. Chagwa has lost her sight and Mr. Chagwa can barely walk. Their son, Hamiton, is the first in their village to finish high school and now is a second year college student! They consider this a miracle. Your gifts to the Minister's Discretionary Fund have made this possible. We will reach their mud hut with straw roof and sit on a mat woven from local grasses. The extended family will gather around and gape at these strangers from America. And we will hear, in Chichewa Language, stories of village life. Behind the house, there is a stunning view of the Great Rift Valley Escarpment; rugged mountains with herds of wild elephants. The thought of some how returning this invitation is beyond my imagination. I just know that we will all be blessed for having sat a spell in this home so far off the beaten track.

Jesus tells his followers that it is because the poor and the lame and the blind cannot return the favor of an invitation that they will be richly blessed. We might say he invites them out of their comfort zone. He invites them beyond the status quo.

For that is where the blessings lie. Whenever we revisit our guest lists, expanding the list for the sake of diversity, we find that we are living in the greatest of hope. Amen.