

St James United Church



Message for August 24, 2025 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

“At the Table Again” - Preached by Katie Vardy

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Luke 12:51-56

Let us pray: Gracious and welcoming God, open our hearts to hear your voice—in scripture, in silence, and in the spaces in between. May the words I speak, and the meditations of all our hearts be rooted in your love, and lead us closer to your justice, your joy, and your grace. Amen.

Friends, it is so good to be home. I still remember what this sanctuary looked like when I was a child. The pews that always creaked in the same spot. The smell of coffee brewing in the church before service. The same handful of hymnals with the worn covers that I used to flip through when I thought the sermon was too long. This church shaped me. This community raised me. It was here that I read scripture out loud for the first time. Here that I started wondering whether ministry might be in my future.

And it was from here that I packed up my bags, boarded a plane, and moved from the rocky, rugged beauty of Newfoundland to the bustling city of Toronto to continue my Master of Divinity at Emmanuel College. I remember feeling a strange mixture of excitement and heartbreak—leaving behind the land and community that raised me, unsure of what I would find in the city. I’ll admit—I was nervous. I wasn’t just moving to a new city. I was moving away from my family, my friends, and everything familiar. I had no idea if I’d find a faith community in Toronto. I was afraid I’d feel out of place. Lost in the crowd...But something remarkable happened.

Not long after I arrived, I found my way to Kingston Road United Church. And there, in a church I’d never stepped foot in before, I was welcomed like I had always belonged. Through the GO Project, I was invited to teach Sunday School. And little by little, something remarkable happened: I stopped feeling like a guest. I started feeling like family. They made room for me—not just at the table, but in the heart of their community. That kind of welcome? It changes a person. And let me tell you—when you’re 2,000 kilometres from home and someone makes you feel like family? That kind of welcome sinks deep into your bones.

So, when I hear Jesus’ words today, this teaching about who we invite to our tables and where we choose to sit, I don’t hear them as abstract metaphors. I hear them as a call to radical hospitality. A hospitality that isn’t about status, or keeping score, or only including those we already know. Jesus looks around the dinner table and says: “When you give a banquet, don’t invite the ones who can pay you back. Invite the poor. Invite the stranger. Invite the forgotten.” – Because that’s how God throws a party. That’s the kind of table I’ve been trying to help build in my ministry.

Today’s Gospel reading is also about tables—and who gets to sit where. Let’s begin with a simple truth: Jesus would have made a terrible dinner guest. He wasn’t known for his politeness or manners around the dinner table. Often, he ate with dirty hands, shared a table with riffraff, and drank more than his enemies considered respectable. Worst of all—he said things. Blunt, uncomfortable truths no one wanted to hear. I always chuckle when people say, ‘It doesn’t matter if Jesus was divine—he was just a really nice guy.’ Because, well... Jesus wasn’t always what we’d call nice. He was kind. He was just. But he didn’t avoid conflict or sugarcoat the truth. He had a way of speaking with unsettling clarity—especially to those in power.

Anyway, Jesus had no filter. And he had this inconvenient habit of pointing out everything people were trying to pretend wasn't happening. Today's reading opens with Jesus being invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee—a respected religious leader, someone with status and reputation. The table is likely set with care, and the guest list has been handpicked. This isn't a potluck or backyard BBQ. This is a curated affair. And Jesus, God bless him, shows up and immediately causes trouble. Luke tells us, "They were watching him closely." As Jesus enters, he watches the guests. And what he sees is a strategic shuffle—each person trying to get the best possible seat at the table. Now, what's with all the shuffling?

To understand this fully, we must step into the world of first-century Judaism. This is no ordinary dinner party. In Jesus' time, meals were deeply social and symbolic. Who you ate with, where you sat, and who saw you there all mattered. Most formal meals were served at a U-shaped table arrangement. The host would sit at the center of the base of the U, and the seats closest to the host were considered the most honourable. The further away you sat, the lower your status. This wasn't just about comfort—it was about honour and shame, which were foundational values in the ancient Mediterranean world. Sitting near the host was seen as a sign of importance, influence, and respect. It said something about who you were. To sit at the far end—or worse, to be asked to move down the table—was humiliating. It was a public demotion. A visible signal that you were less than you thought you were. So, it's no wonder people scrambled for the best spots. They were trying to secure their place—not just at the table, but in the social order.

Let's go back to that moment in the room. Everyone's trying to appear chill. They're nibbling olives, making small talk, pretending they didn't just elbow past someone to get a better seat. And Jesus, with a smile that's just a little too knowing, begins: "When you're invited to a wedding banquet, don't sit at the place of honour." ... The room gets quiet. "If someone more important comes along, you might be asked to move. And trust me—there's nothing more embarrassing than standing up, with your half-eaten appetizer, and being told, 'Actually, could you sit way down there?'" What Jesus is doing here, isn't just etiquette advice. He's not trying to make them more socially graceful. He's exposing something deeper. He's shining a light on the way we all try to prove our worth. We might not fight for literal seats anymore, but don't we still jockey for position? Who has the title? Who gets the credit? Whose voice carries weight? Jesus doesn't just see this game—he undermines it. He says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Which is a very Jesus thing to say. And a very annoying thing to hear—especially if you've just taken the best seat.

Then Jesus turns his attention to the host: "When you give a banquet," he says, "don't invite your friends, or your siblings, or your rich neighbours. They'll just invite you back, and you'll be repaid. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." In other words: invite the people who can't pay you back. Invite the ones who don't increase your standing. Invite those who are used to being excluded—those who, in that time, were considered ritually unclean, cursed, or shameful... This was radical. In a world where every invitation was a social transaction—"I invite you, you invite me"—Jesus imagines a feast that breaks the cycle. A meal not built on reciprocity, but on grace. Now, remember, he's saying this at a banquet. To the host. Who probably invited his friends, siblings, and wealthy neighbors. So, this is likely the moment the disciples start eyeing the door. "Oh no, he did not just say that." "Oh yes—he absolutely did."

But Jesus isn't trying to be rude for the sake of it. He's being honest and telling the truth—not to shame, but to reveal. He's painting a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like: a table where the seats are reserved not for the powerful, but the forgotten. A feast where grace is the only currency, and love is the only requirement. Jesus knew that the table was more than a piece of furniture. It was a place where relationships were built. Where community was shaped. Where worth was assigned. And he wasn't interested in preserving the old ways. He wanted to flip the

whole table over. Because God's table isn't like ours. It isn't curated for comfort or designed for influence. God's table has room for everyone— especially those the world has left behind.

And that's not just ancient theology. That's been the heart of my ministry journey. As part of my Supervised Ministry Education placement, which is what the Settlement Charge evolved into, I've been serving at Birchcliff Bluffs United Church—a small congregation on the east end of Toronto that's teaching me more about humility and hospitality than any textbook ever could. We're not perfect. But we are a community that's learning and growing together. A community that's asking big questions about what it means to be faithful in a world that feels fractured. A community that doesn't always know the answers but shows up anyway.

And through that congregation, I've been involved in the ministry of Rainbow Community Places—a beautiful, brave space where queer and trans youth and seniors gather in safety, in laughter, in dignity. Once a week, the basement of the church transforms into a drop-in centre. In the morning, we host Dorothy's Place for the seniors and in the evening, we host Toby's Place for the youth. There's food. There's conversation. There's care. There's healing. It's not glamorous. There's no fancy China or five-course meals. But I can tell you—it is holy. There is something sacred about seeing someone who has spent a lifetime trying to find a place where they belong, finally find a place where they are not just tolerated but embraced. There is something deeply Christ-like in watching people who have been excluded from countless tables finally sit down and be fed. Jesus said, "Invite the ones who can't repay you." And I think he also meant: "Invite the ones who have been told, again and again, that there is no place for them here." At Rainbow Community Places, we try to live that invitation. And in doing so, we echo the heart of Christ, who always, always made room for one more.

Hospitality, in this Gospel story, isn't just about being nice. It's holy resistance. It's a direct challenge to every system—religious, political, cultural—that says some lives are worth more than others. It's a declaration that God's love does not follow the rules of merit or hierarchy. It flows freely. It shows up at the margins. It flips the seating chart upside down. And if we want to follow Jesus, we have to let it reshape our tables too.

And now, here I am. Back in Newfoundland. Back in the church that taught me how to pray, how to lead, how to love. But I've come home changed. Not in the sense that I've arrived or figured it all out. But changed because I've sat at new tables. I've seen what it looks like when the Gospel comes alive through casseroles and mismatched chairs and brave conversations. And I want to say thank you. Because this church gave me my first seat. You welcomed me long before I had a degree or a title. You let me stumble. You let me grow. You believed in me. And that belief has rippled far beyond these walls and this island. Because of you, queer and trans youth in Scarborough now gather in safety. Because of you, seniors who've known isolation find laughter and love. Because of you, I've had the courage to keep pulling up more chairs and the table keeps on growing. You may not have known it at the time, but your kindness trained me to see the Gospel not as something abstract, but as something embodied...In shared laughter. In Sunday School crafts. In tables long enough for everyone.

So, here's the challenge Jesus gives us today: Don't scramble for the best seat. Don't build communities based on power or reciprocity. Build them based on grace. Welcome those who can't repay you. Set tables where the margins become the centre. Let humility guide you, and love define you. Friends, may we always be the kind of people who don't fight for the best seat, but who scoot over and say, "There's room here, come sit with me." May we throw banquets that confuse the world and delight God. May we never forget that the truest honour is found not at the head of the table, but in the company of those the world forgot. And may this home, this beloved church, always be a place where welcome tastes like bread, grace flows like wine, and love sets the table. May it be so. Amen.