On one occasion, when Jesus was going to a dinner party at the home of a leader of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely.

And Jesus was watching them pretty closely, right back.

Jesus was watching and waiting for an opportunity – the chance to turn the tables on them, as he often did. He was watching and waiting for an opening to teach them something….

... something about the upside-down, reverse-order of God’s kingdom, compared to their own.

Now dinner parties in Jesus’ time were far more than events where people got together to share a meal and good company. There was a prescribed etiquette that governed the serving of guests in the home.

Meals were ways these ancient people encoded and enforced the strict social divisions of their times. In other words, who was invited, where and with whom they sat, even what they were fed … well, that told the whole story … the whole story of who was who, and who was not.
At that time, the guest list for these parties would include folks from different levels of both affluence and influence. Depending on who you were, you were fed either the most expensive and exquisite food in the house, or a cheaper, more paltry meal.

Those with favored status got the best wine; others, more like vinegar to drink.

Food and beverages were measured out like the host’s friendship: in degrees of both quality and quantity.

You could also tell who was at the top of the popularity charts by who got the best seat in the house. This place of honor was, in fact, at the innermost point of couches arranged in concentric circles. The more important the guest, the closer he sat to the host, who was always at the center.

However, should a person or higher status arrive late, social customs permitted the host to tell a guest already seated in the center to move…not ask, mind you, but tell: “give up your seat!”

Folks would, no doubt, have had no small amount of anxiety as they prepared for a party, worried about the embarrassing prospect of social disaster if they assumed a privilege of place that was not ultimately to be theirs.

Jesus, ever the one determined to overturn any custom which excluded the most vulnerable, did indeed, watch closely that night.
Gently, in a way they might understand and accept, he told the gathered party-goers a parable.

“Think about your situation in a new way” he suggested through the story.
“Because your way is not the way the Lord, your God, wants you to greet and treat each other.”

“Our table must be open to the last people on this earth you might imagine” he was saying: the most humbled ones, the ones they would never, left to their own devices, share a meal with…

…people who are poor, crippled, lame and blind…
…people with nothing left to lose…
…people who are hard to take care of and need a lot of help…
…people who think differently and act differently than you do…
…people who have no social currency, no way to repay in kind;
…people, who for sure, will never be the life of the party.

We might wonder what Jesus, watching the dinner parties of our time and culture, might have to say to us… gently, we hope, of course; in a way we might understand and accept.

Our dinner parties are somewhat different than the ones to which Jesus went. For example, we would never think to ask one of our guests to make their way to a
lower or farther place. Likewise, to our credit, the food that’s served at the head table is usually the same for all who gather.

We maintain our social divisions by who is not invited – rather than how folks are treated once they’re there. Our dinner parties might be more clearly characterized by who is not welcome at the table – by who is on our “don’t invite” guest list rather than by the stratified practices of Jesus’ time.

We might well wonder how Jesus would react to such a list.

What would Jesus have to say, I wonder, about those labeled “not welcome” by someone in our time, someone, perhaps, like a Pat Robertson, for example?

A guy like that, well, he’s got to have a long list of folks that would be “not invited” to his parties.

We might guess that there would be no atheists and maybe not even a wavering agnostic would be included. No liberals of any political party need expect an invitation from him; no homosexuals, no feminists, no prostitutes, no people with AIDS. There would be no people from New Orleans or Haiti, we can be certain – not from those places that have made such well-publicized deals with the devil and are hated by God.

There would probably be few Episcopalians! We would also be surprised to see anyone from the Jewish or Muslim faiths at the table… nor would we expect to see…
... people who believe that global warming is a fact...
... people who say that no war could ever be holy...
... people who think hate crimes are real and should be punished ...

Nope, not one of those folks would be welcome on the lowest rung of Pat’s social registry.

Jesus would have plenty to say to that host, for sure.

“Don’t do it that way” he might urge. “Open up, let down your judgmental guard, share a meal with people who are not like you—and be changed!”

But what about people like us?

What might Jesus have to say, I wonder, about those labeled “not welcome” by someone like us, someone, perhaps, like a Pat Grace, for example?

You know, I have never actually made such a list, but being very honest with you all, I am ashamed to admit how easily the categories of “non-invitees” came to mind.

My list would include, right off the bat, anyone who physically or sexually abuses a woman or a child. My list would include, for sure, any of those of any religious persuasion, especially priests and ministers, who think they can say who will go to Heaven and who will go to Hell. You would not see, for example, … people who are know-it-alls…
…people who believe that war can always be justified
…people who say the Holocaust was a hoax…
…people who blame the poor or alcoholics or drug addicts for their lot…

Nope, none of them would be my choice as dinner companions.

Likewise, Rush Limbaugh…
…likewise, the CEO of BP…
…likewise, any and all persons responsible for reality TV shows…
…and anyone who insists on turning left across three lanes of oncoming traffic during rush hour in Atlanta!

There are others that could go on my list and these I am particularly ashamed to admit:
…some homeless people – the ones who scare me, who aggressively accost me for money or stare me down as they cross Courtland Street against the light.

My list might get a bit more personal, at this point, and include …
…people I find it hard to forgive…
…the nameless guy who broke into my car a few years ago ….
…my first serious boyfriend, who did me wrong…
…and others, who have hurt me in the past, whom I cannot seem to let go…

All of these folks might find their way to my “not welcome” list.
And, by now, you’ve figured out that I would have a hard time pulling out a chair at my table for Pat Robertson, himself….and I think we can be pretty sure he would be more than reluctant to sit across from me, at his.

My guess is that most of us could make such a list, if we were to be honest with each other… a list of folks we would rather die than dine with.

And that’s the thing…there it is, right there…
…the thing that Jesus is watching them and watching us so closely for…
…the thing that Jesus would for sure, have something to say to all of us about..

…and probably none too gently, because He would expect us to already understand… Pat Robertson and me, and all of us, we Christians, who truly do want to be like Jesus, to follow his way and serve him.

I think Jesus would say to all of us potential “not welcome list” makers that we are all out of line.

We know what Jesus insists on, i.e., that for us, his followers, there can never be a “not welcome” or a “don’t invite” list – ever.

Making such a list, even theoretically, that is, making our judgment of others primary is the last thing we’re supposed to do, if we want to really follow His lead.

That’s certainly part of the reversal, the table turning that Jesus would want to do with us today.
But I think Jesus is watching us so closely and is hoping so hard that we’ll get an even deeper message.

Jesus is asking us, inviting us, praying for us, to put our dislike and our fear, our prejudice and judgmentality last….

…and to choose love first.

Jesus is asking us to make his way of loving, first in our hearts and to use that way as the basis for any and all guest lists we will ever make again.

Jesus is telling us to give up our seats…our judgment seats, and move up higher…move up higher to a better place.

Jesus is telling us to leave our ego-driven central seats of honor – and give up our presumption of the privilege of place ….

…our presumption of the privilege of place, which is not ours for the taking, but given by God.

Jesus invites us down to the cheap seats, to the place where he so often puts himself: in the margins, where, first and last, he can always be found.

Jesus is encouraging us to spend less time dreaming of dining on the top floor of Trump Tower and move our sightline to the tail-gate table tops in the parking lot beside the shelter at Peachtree and Pine.¹
Because when we do that – when we pull ourselves out of the center of our own universe, our perspective can change.

When we get ourselves out of the center and into the margins, it’s there, Jesus would say, if we are watching closely that we can begin to see things as he does; where we can begin to see what Jesus wants us to notice and learn …what Jesus wants us to make our prescribed etiquette toward others.

That code of etiquette begins with the firmly held belief that no one has a right to a place at God’s table. The only way anyone – any one of us – gets on that guest list is by grace – the unearned, unmerited, loving kindness of God, given in spite of ourselves.

Because God sees every one of us, every one of us, as we truly are, and invites us to the table, anyway.

God sees us as we truly are, all of us – poor and crippled and lame and blind –yet has extended a hand of welcome to all of us through Jesus Christ.

God knows that every one of us, every one of us, is the kind of person that, left to our own devices, we would never want to share a meal with.

God knows that all of us, all of us, are people with nothing left to lose…
…who are hard to take care of and need a lot of help…
…who think and act differently at times, than God wants us to…
…who have no social currency, no way to repay God in kind.
God knows that we are all people, who almost always forget that it’s God who is the life of the party!

God knows our unworthiness, but even so, after all is said and done, our worthiness is not the thing that matters to God.

Jesus invites us today to recognize that our worth and the worth of all people are not measured by the judgment of our peers or the social standards of this world.

*Our* welcome to God’s table has been earned by Jesus, our gracious host, and is measured out in the exquisite quality and limitless quantity of *His* friendship.

Jesus bids us to come up higher than our self-absorbed and judgmental natures might allow. He beckons us to sit at the head table with him, right alongside all the rest of humanity whom God has exalted through Jesus’ sacrifice and love.

Jesus calls us today to the Eucharist table, to understand and accept that although we are all unworthy, we are still all chosen; that although we are all full of pride, jealously and judgment, we are all, first, last and always, God’s beloved people.

Jesus invites us today to remember that all of us have the potential to be lifted up and exalted by him who loves us and shows us the way.

And Jesus tells us to live our lives like we believe it.
FYI: Peachtree and Pine is an emergency shelter for men which is located on the corner next to St. Luke’s. It houses 600-800 men per night, and has become a very controversial place in the community due to disagreements about safety, humane treatment of the residents, etc. Due to its proximity to St. Luke’s and some recent animosity from that organization toward the homeless program we offer, many parishioners have shied away from associating with the shelter. Also, due to the large number of men who are often transient and involved in petty crimes at the church and around the nearby area, there are growing feelings of fear and anger toward the residents.