

My family and I have really fallen in love with the Netflix show, *Love on the Spectrum*. It follows several individuals, including a Clemson student and woman from Greenville who are on the autism spectrum and are interested in finding love. Their severity of autism differs, and their awkward interactions with one another are both innocent and inspiring. I often use COVID as an excuse but ever since then, I find that I have become more and more awkward at parties. For starters, I'm not good at small talk. I am famous for going in for the hug when someone offers their hand for a handshake and then going in for the handshake when they're giving up the hug. Or having someone approach me and not remember their name and try to introduce them to the person standing with me. What I do for a living can be intense and because religious is often a taboo subject at parties, I'm often sidelined or hijacked. I'm also known to say difficult things and that too can be awkward for those who are in the mood to party and forget about hard things. Awkward! Today's story or parable has Jesus right smack in the middle of a very awkward situation of his own making. Here Jesus' awkwardness was on purpose. Here you know without a doubt that "God came to us as we are, met us where we live, in the human words of Scripture that become the very voice of God, in the man of Jesus who becomes the very presence of God. Nowhere is Jesus' human nearness more apparent than in the portrayal of Jesus moving from one dinner party to the next" (Willimon). At first glance I thought this story was about table manners or hospitality, but the more I studied it, the more this story revealed about God with skin on: Jesus as Party Person. Though if I had come up with this title, I think I would have preferred Jesus as "Awkward Dinner Guest." Jesus was usually a guest around someone's table or in their home. He took advantage of a party or a meal to tell stories and teach, as well as

to enjoy those around him. “Jesus was accused more than once of showing the unseemly behavior of ‘a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Matt. 11:19)” (Willimon). While he wasn’t always awkward, many if not most of the stories we encounter in Scripture about Jesus at parties, usually involve Jesus turning out to be an awkward dinner guest. As an example, we’re looking at a parable in Luke, chapter 14.

First, a quick review of what occurs right before today’s story. Jesus is invited to the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, and they’re watching him carefully. That’s the first level of awkwardness. You know what it’s like when you’re invited into a hostile situation where one person or group doesn’t like another- for the most part- the Pharisees did not like Jesus. They were just waiting for him to mess up so they could hold him accountable for his misbehavior. On the way to the Pharisee’s home, Jesus heals a man who has dropsy, or what we’d call edema today. It’s the accumulation of excess fluids throughout the body. Anyways, Jesus chooses to heal this man on the Sabbath on his way to a Pharisees’ home, perhaps causing him to be late for the meal. Being late is rude but healing on the Sabbath we all know that was a big NO-NO. Talk about the tension and intensity at this dinner party?! I’m sure there was some talking behind Jesus’ back about what had just taken place and how he broke the law. Regardless, Jesus walks in and makes it even more awkward upon his arrival. As soon as he notices how people chose positions of honor, he offers a parable essentially telling off the guests. He gives them a hard time for picking the best spots and tells them to choose the lowest places instead. When Jesus is done insulting the guests, he turns to the host and tells him to stop inviting those who can reciprocate like his

stuffed-shirt friends and cronies. Instead, invite those who cannot repay you such as the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. By now, everyone had been deliberately insulted by Jesus at this party. At this critical moment of awkwardness, of the kingdom clashing with the way we normally think and act, Jesus tells another parable. Before listening to God's word, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Did you know that Luke has more references to eating, banquets, tables, and reclining at tables than any other Gospel? This suggests that sitting or reclining at the table is where many of Jesus' teachings take place, including today's parable. This ritual of sharing a meal together quickly turns into a lesson on kingdom living. Jesus' parable of seating arrangements and table manners is Jesus' way of saying, "we are capable of so much more than this," which is also what I say about our city and country right now. But I digress. Back to the awkwardness. Jesus brought the awkward to the party, and I'm down for it. For example, "in a world where women were relegated to the home, Jesus welcomed them to travel with him on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem and was entertained by them in their homes. He seemed on making the private go public. He loved the give-in-take of public debate" (Willimon). I wish we, like Jesus, had more models of civil discourse in our day and age. But back to today's parable. Upon hearing Jesus shock the guests and host into silence, one of the dinner guests tries to smooth things over. "You know how people say things to try to break the awkwardness? I can imagine everyone sitting there in stunned silence. What do you say when Jesus has just ripped everybody apart at the dinner party? This dinner guest makes a valiant but failed attempt to save the situation. "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" I can almost hear him adding, "Could you please pass the

butter?” He’s trying to defuse an awkward situation. It doesn’t work, though. It just sets Jesus off on another story that ramps up the awkwardness even more” ([link](#))!

Here comes Jesus bringing back up the poor, crippled, blind and lame again.

“Jesus is making an in-your-face political statement by inviting those whom the world excludes, to show what the world’s defeat looks like when, at last, God’s kingdom comes. God’s will is done on earth as it always is done in heaven”

(Willimon). I really don’t think the guests nor host get it. Do we? I’m wondering if

this story isn’t so much about hospitality or table manners but about living the

kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven?! Excuses, excuses! We’re good at

them, aren’t we? The more privileged we are, the more excuses we have. Do you

mean to tell me that a near eastern 1st century man lets his new wife keep him

from a party? Or that in a part of the world where arable land is at a premium, the

other guy has bought real estate sight unseen (Willimon)? Excuses, yes. Good

ones? Absolutely not! “Living in the kingdom of God? We’re already doing it,” we

say. Yet, we still say no to grace. Lame excuses. Are we awkward or

uncomfortable yet? Because if we aren’t, we probably aren’t doing kingdom

living. “Jesus offers the kingdom, a perpetual feast of peace, a feast of help,

guidance, friendship, rest, victory over self, control of passions, supremacy over

circumstances—a feast of joy, tranquility, deathlessness, Heaven opened,

immeasurable hope—salvation. Yet, people turn their backs on this feast,

preferring a visit with their possessions and affections” (Kent Hughes, [link](#)). In

today’s parable, after those on the streets are invited and arrive, there’s still room

at the banquet table for more. So the servant goes back and invites more from

the streets to come in so that “the house may be filled” (v. 23). And then there’s this last line, “For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.” What does Jesus mean by this? Talk about really awkward?!

Here “make excuses” is translated as “beg off” or “decline.” This word in Greek carries a veneer of politeness, but beneath it lies deep resistance. It’s not an outright rebellion. It’s not a hostile rejection. It’s a socially acceptable way to say, “No, thank you,” to the grace of God. Isn’t that just like privilege? Privilege doesn’t usually rage against God; it just finds something else to do. It doesn’t cry out in need; it calmly excuses itself. These invitees had the means, the status, and the agency to say no. They were **insulated by success, buffered by comfort**. So they declined, even though they had already agreed to come, and the table was set, with reasons that sounded reasonable, but that ultimately revealed a heart numbed by abundance. A heart numbed by abundance. Think about that for a minute. Their priorities weren’t evil; they were just self-focused. That’s how privilege becomes apathy: not through hatred, but through distraction. Through the quiet, steady hum of “I’m fine,” and when you’re “fine,” you stop noticing how hungry you are. Yet, if you are truly hungry, you will come and eat!

Although “many a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, they soon regretted it the minute Jesus went on the attack during the dinnertime conversation” (Willimon). My mom used to say to my siblings and me, “This is not appropriate dinnertime conversation.” I’m sure many hosts wanted to tell Jesus this very same thing. Nevertheless, Jesus’ goal wasn’t to be rude nor to have bad table etiquette. Along those same lines some of us- when invited to parties- dress up and engage in

revelry because it can offer a respite from the anxiety-driven and demanding world. “But in his partying, Jesus rejects a temporary respite from this world; he shows them and us a glimpse of this world healed, finished, redeemed, and restored to what God originally intended. At these parties and in this open-handed invitation to all to come and join in the fellowship, it’s like Jesus is giving the world a foretaste of the messianic banquet yet to be. It’s by design that “the Lord’s Supper occurs around a dinner table. Jesus’ own gregarious life made oxymoronic the term ‘solitary Christian.’ You can’t do this faith thing solo” (Willimon). Just as when we eat lunch together following worship or when you eat dinner with others, conversation occurs. “God in Christ is encountered at a mundane dinner table- sharing food and drink with friends” (Willimon). “Thus today, when the bread is broken, when the cup of juice is poured for Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the minister may say, ‘Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Let us keep the feast!’” (Willimon).

Here at Christ’s table there are no head tables or seating arrangements. Everyone is invited to come and share a meal where Jesus is the host. Will you accept Christ’s invitation to come? Are you hungry enough to dine at Christ’s table and to receive God’s grace and participate in kingdom living? Once we partake, we’re sent from Christ’s table to gather around other tables and build relationships with people who aren’t like us as we break bread together. After examining our own hearts and excuses, may we accept Jesus’ invitation and “favor the ones who cannot repay us. Prefer the poor. Choose awkwardness every time. Remember that we don’t determine worth at Christ’s table. Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters- because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and

the people whom we choose to invite and welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. This is God's world we live in; nothing here is ordinary" (Thomas). Jesus died on the cross partly of his behavior or awkwardness at parties-crucified for the company he kept. Still is (Willimon). Will you receive God's grace or will you offer lame excuses?! Let's be awkward like Jesus and accept his invitation to the table and to kingdom living! Thanks be to God! Amen.