



Why, Church? (Why Have We Become a Country Club?)

Luke 14:1-14

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The season of Lent offers a time of intentional reflection on the brokenness of humanity. It has been, since its earliest days, a time to acknowledge and repent of that which keeps us from fully living into the will of God. Through 40 days of fasting and deliberate consideration, we come to better understand the need for God to do that which we can't do for ourselves – namely, to heal us, to cleanse us, and to give us new life. The season of Lent is reminder of the need for a Savior to come and make us whole.

In Lent this year, we are asking the question, “Why, Church?” Over the past four weeks, we’ve asked, why are we so self-obsessed, so power hungry, so institutionally focused, and so complicit with toxic nationalism? Given the brokenness associated with power, nationalism, institutionalism, and self-obsession, perhaps this morning’s focus will come as little surprise. Today, we are asking the question, *Why, Church? Why have we become a country club?*

Knowing that there are some country clubs nearby, let me define what I mean when asking this question. Merriam Webster broadly defines *country club* as, “a suburban club for social life and recreation.” This is *not* my focus – I am not speaking about the church as a recreational or social venue.

Wikipedia narrows the definition by offering that a *country club* is: “a privately owned club, often with membership quota and admittance by invitation or sponsorship, that generally offers both a variety of recreational sports and facilities for dining and entertaining.” This hits a little closer to my intent, focusing on, “a privately owned club with admittance by invitation or sponsorship.”

Wikipedia goes on to say that, “country clubs can be exclusive organizations,” and that, “[country clubs] are considered the precursor to gated community development.”

This hits the nail on the head in my framework of questioning, “Why has the church become a country club?” In many cases and places, the Church has become a restrictive community of like-minded, economically-secure, invitation or sponsorship-only members, which has as part of its identity the exclusiveness of a gated community.

Let me offer a couple of examples of how I have seen this country club mentality in the Church.

Some years ago, I went to a church conference in Tipp City, Ohio at Ginghamburg Church, a United Methodist Congregation. Ginghamburg is one of the largest Methodist churches in the world, and had been expanding their ministry by creating new church locations in and around Detroit, which is just south of Tipp City. One of their new locations was in an old church building with a dwindling

congregation. The church building had been in that location for many years, but the neighborhood around it had changed significantly. When this old church was first built, it was in the center of an economically stable white community. As white-flight led the church members to move outside the Detroit city limits, the neighborhood changed significantly, now being made up of a predominantly lower-income black population. Yet, while the neighborhood had changed, the dwindling church congregation had not. It was still made up of these well-off white congregants who had moved away but continued to drive into the city to attend the old church.

When Ginghamburg took over the church to revitalize the space with a new congregation, the planting pastor made his way through the neighborhood to introduce himself. He was curious why none of the local neighbors attended the church (I mean, the building was right there in the neighborhood – by far the closest church they could attend). One may think that the reason the new neighbors refused to attend was connected with the racial differences between the now black neighborhood and the white congregation; I'm certain that played a part. But the pastor said the comment that stood out to him was this: one man, when asked why he hadn't attended the church, offered in response, "I've seen the people coming and going from the church on Sunday mornings. I don't have any clothing that would make me feel as if I belong in a congregation that is dressed as well as those people." ... It was the quality of their clothing that indicated to him he may not be welcome.

A few months later, after returning home from the conference, I was speaking with a neighbor of the church I served in Centreville. This was a person who I had known for some time, who lived near the church, and who had been in the church building for different functions, but a person who had never attended the church on Sunday mornings. Intrigued by what I had heard at Ginghamburg, I asked this individual if there was any particular reason why they had not attended worship at the church. His answer echoed what I heard at the conference. He responded, "I can tell I don't belong simply by driving by on Sunday mornings and seeing the parking lot. There's just a few too many BMWs and Mercedes for my old broken car to feel welcome."

Now, one could make the argument that there was no intentionality behind the church in Detroit or the church in Centreville being something akin to a country club, where only a certain subset of the population felt welcomed or accepted. There were no physical gates or membership restrictions keeping others – those who perhaps dressed in less-expensive clothes, or who drove less fancy cars – from attending or sharing in the ministry. And yet, like a country club, there was a clear socio-economic division between those inside and those outside. The church, as a body of individuals, akin to a suburban country club, was not a reflection of the full community in which the church was located. That, as we find in our scripture today, is a problem for Jesus.

As scholar John Carroll offers, "Jesus, in this text, invites his audience ... to imagine an alternative community in which status defines social relations in a radically different way."ⁱ

Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem, going from town to town, and village to village. We've already seen that Jesus had been challenged for healing on the Sabbath day, an event that repeats itself three times in Luke's gospel. In this morning's text, Jesus is heading to the house of a Pharisee to have a meal on the Sabbath.

In the Jewish culture, as with most of our human history, Table Fellowship is an important part of social life. There is significance in gathering with others at the table – whether that be the communion table, a coffee house table, or the family dining room table. Though we often see table fellowship as a time to break from the normal flow of life – a lunch break, a dinner siesta, or a date night – for Jesus, gathering at the table was very much part of his life’s work.

On this occasion, Jesus was going to dine in the house of a Pharisee. As I mentioned last week, the Pharisees have a love-hate relationship with Jesus. He teaches them to love everyone, and they hate him for it. But Jesus has established himself as a person with power in the community. The people have flocked to him to hear his teachings, and he has displayed divine powers of healing. And so, regardless how tense their relationship may have been, the Pharisees were never far from Jesus, indeed, even inviting him over for dinner. They liked being close to Jesus’ power.

On their way to the dinner, Jesus passed a man with dropsy. The text tells us, “the [Pharisees] were watching him closely.” Unlike the prior healing on the Sabbath, where Jesus healed the woman at the synagogue only to be chastised by the Pharisee afterward, this time, Jesus invites their criticism before offering the healing. “He asked the lawyers and Pharisees, ‘Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?’ But they were silent, and Jesus healed the man, and sent him away.”

Even before they arrive at the dinner table, Jesus has already begun to draw the line in the sand. He’s already provoking the Pharisees, these legal leaders of the Jewish community, before they even reach the location of the party.

As they got to the house, Jesus displays his sociological tendencies. He stood back and watched as the guest came in and choose their seats at the table. He observed as everyone tried to choose a seat of honor. In response, Jesus offers this word of advice in the form of a parable. He says, “If you are going to a wedding banquet, do not sit at the place of honor, because someone more distinguished than you has been invited. And if you are sitting in the place of honor, you will be asked to give up your seat for the more distinguished guest, and you will be disgraced. Instead, sit at the lowest seat of honor, and you will be invited to move into a seat of more prominence, and you will be honored in front of everyone.”

In the near-ancient east, social status was a vital part of public functions. Jesus’ parable, though intended to offer some level of chastisement on those gathering at the table, would have likely been received as sound advice. It would have been devastating for a person’s social standing to have a host publicly ask them to move to a seat of “lower status.”

Scholar Fred Craddock jokes about the cartoonish vision of Jesus’ invitation.ⁱⁱ Should everyone, upon entering the dining room, rush for the chair of lowest status in hopes of being invited to move up to a seat of greater honor? It’s a joke to think that would happen, given the size of human egos. At most, we would play around with sitting a chair or two lower than we think worthy of our social standing; but even then, we would question, what happens if I’m not invited to move up? Am I degrading my own

social standing by choosing a chair lower than I believe myself to be worthy? Jesus puts a challenging invitation in the minds of the guests.

First, Jesus heals a man on the sabbath while mocking the Pharisees, and next he's offering riddles about their social status while critiquing a common gathering place for the social elite.

But his final criticism cuts closest to the home as he calls out the host of the meal. ... Indeed, he calls out everyone one in the room who has ever hosted a meal.

"He said to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"

Jesus is aware of the common practice among the social elite. I invite you to a dinner party, and in return, you invite me to your next dinner party. I am willing to shell out to provide the finest of wines and some kobe beef for dinner because I know that you when you host me, you too will be offering the finest of wines, and perhaps some lobster. We are used to the back and forth invitation, knowing that what I offer you I will receive in return.

It is this practice of fraternizing with only those who can offer you what you hope to receive in response that defines the exclusiveness of invitation- and sponsorship-only clubs. Jesus insists on a different way of living.

There are many in the Church, who in response to the toxicity of congregational exclusiveness, chime the bell and cry, "All Are Welcome." I mean, these words are on our own display board in the front of the church on Washington Street. But look closely at the text; Jesus is not offering an "all are welcome" position to join at the table. Jesus says, "*do not invite* your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or your rich neighbors." In this text, Jesus is not asking for us to build bigger tables so we can add *more* people. Instead, Jesus says, when you give a banquet, invite a different group of people; invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Rev. Amy Lindeman Allen offers, "Jesus does not command those with privilege to make space at their tables, to give a portion of their excess to charities, or to invite a disadvantaged neighbor to join the feast. No," she says, "Jesus invites those with privilege to *put off their privilege*, to disclaim any greater honor or status that it represents, and then to use the excess that their privilege has still provided to feed not their fellow privileged friends, but those who are most in need."ⁱⁱⁱ

In this text, Jesus is inviting us to claim a posture of hospitality that goes beyond the standards of societal norm. It is certainly a critique of the country club mentality that pervades the Church, where-in we try to create "safe spaces" from those "outside," as if the Church is supposed to be a place where we avoid and escape the *others* who have moved in, reside in, and work in our community.

Jesus is redefining the purpose of the Church, and, understanding that the Church is just the collective body of the whole, Jesus is redefining our individual purpose as well. Keeping in mind that everything Jesus does is to reclaim, repurpose, and perhaps overthrow the world according to God's will, it's important for us to think about Jesus' critique of the Pharisee's dinner part as it pertains to our own hosting of, and sharing in meals with one another. Is the world we are creating, as individuals and as the collective whole, one that supports the exclusivity of country clubs? Or is it a world wherein we recognize one another as equals regardless of social connection, economic status, mental health, national origin, gender- or sexual-identity, race, or occupation?

Are we utilizing our shared relationships as opportunities for self-advancement and personal gain, or are we utilizing human connection for the purpose of building up God's kingdom here on earth?

It is a worthy question for us to ask in this season of Lent, "Why, Church, have we become such a country club?" Why have we given ourselves to the power-hungry ways of the world, in which human interactions have become little more than social transactions?

For, contrary to social norms, the good news of the Gospel is that in the economy of God's kingdom, there is only one form of currency that matters, and that is the love of Jesus Christ. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. All who give for the blessing of true community will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Jesus invites us to a life built upon mutual love rather than mutual obligation, for we have been created, all of us, in the beautiful image of God to share in the work of God together. May the words and teaching of Christ continue to call us to a new way of living that God's will may be known, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

ⁱ John T. Carroll. *Luke: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Lindeman Allen. "Eating Together – Luke 14:1, 7-14." *Politicaltheology.com*. Retrieved March 23, 2022.