

Sunday, August 29, 2010: Luke 14:1, 7-14

by [Patrick J. Willson](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

Magazines list what's in and what's out and persuade us that it's important to know the difference. As school begins, a child psychologist announces on television that what's in and what's out is particularly important for kids. Happy alliances that endure throughout the year will be made on the basis of what young people wear and carry with them these first days of school.

So let's get it straight: *Toy Story 3* lunchboxes are very in, X-Men lunchboxes are so last year, and Superman lunchboxes are not even a blip on the screen of in-ness.

In Williamsburg, Virginia, where I live, the fraternities and sororities of The College of William & Mary invite new members in (and leave others out). What's in and what's out translates cunningly into who's in and who's out. Lest you imagine that we've left such distinctions behind with the passing years, reflect on driving through the security entrance to a gated community or walking into a hotel under a doorman's eye. Who's in and who's out is a matter of grave consequence.

Only a few verses before, in the Gospel of Luke, this becomes a matter of consequence for Jesus. Someone asks, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" (13:23). Will this be an exclusive group?

Usually those who ask, "Will only a few be saved?" are secure in their sense of being in and wonder who they may have to tolerate.

Instead of answering directly Jesus paints a picture of the kingdom of God, bright with all the colors of grace: "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (13:29).

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day imagined the end of human history as a great banquet, and some groups had definite notions about who would be invited. When scholars unrolled the Dead Sea Scrolls, they found books of the Bible, including Hosea and Jeremiah. They also found what one group understood to be the invitation list for that great banquet: "All the wise men of the congregation, the learned and the intelligent, men whose way is perfect and men of ability . . . the men of renown."

That's who is invited, but:

No man smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish; no old and tottery man unable to stay still in the midst of the congregation; none of these shall come . . . among the congregation of the men of renown, for the Angels of Holiness are [with] their [congregation] ("The Messianic Rule," *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*).

When I read that in class an octogenarian laughed as he piped up: "Preacher, you know that business about tottery old men who can't stay still in the middle of church? They're saying they don't want folks with weak bladders!" There's no room for human frailty at that table. No room for old men with weak bladders or those who need assistance or children whispering who need to be taken out.

This is a stag affair: "Wise men . . . men of renown . . . men of ability." Modern synagogues and churches read the scriptures inclusively, but that ancient guest list intends to be exclusive: no room for women, or for the lame or blind or deaf or blemished or scarred. There is no room for those who have been wounded by life; no room for those who have been broken by the journey, but only for "men of renown."

Jesus proposes a different table: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed." Don't allow the world to prepare a guest list with petty calculations of "in and out." Jesus does not offer another invitation list with different estimations of who's in and who's out. He announces something radical and rambunctious—"invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." He does not exchange one invitation list for another but expands God's invitation beyond every limitation and every exclusion.

In our anxiety about who's in and who's out we face the dilemma that we can never be in enough to be truly secure. Jesus noticed this when he was invited to a meal and saw the guests scurrying to claim places of honor. Even among those who are in, some must be more in than others. If "in and out" measures everything, then there must always be another inner circle that is more exclusive. But this dividing into the accepted and the unaccepted can never quiet our anxiety. Real peace comes another way.

Let your host decide, Jesus says. Let your host say to you, "Friend, come up higher." As long as you grasp and scurry for a place of welcome you can never feel at home.

No matter how hard you try you can never earn a welcome. You can only receive welcome as a gift.

Who is this host who speaks so graciously to us and calls us friend? Who can it be other than Christ himself? We do not have to scramble for a place at his table. Our names are on the invitation list. A place is prepared, and when we hold back, uncertain that we really belong, too timid to believe we are truly welcome, he says, "Friend, come up higher."

Everyone is welcome here. You don't have to puff yourself up or pretend. Your value is not determined by calculations. You don't have to get and grab and grasp and grapple for a place. You are welcome here.