

I went to see the movie Dinner for Schmucks, assuming that it was about Holy Communion.

Turns out instead it is more like a commentary on today's gospel reading, a movie about a dinner hosted by the elite for idiots they find entertaining, a cruel set-up at the expense of half of the guests.

It may be, however, a tamer version of the set-up into which Jesus is invited.

His long march toward the cross is gaining momentum, including the mounting conflict with the elite and the powerful who do not resonate with his inclusive, compassionate and socially dangerous vision of God.

They were watching him closely, Luke says, and not for entertainment value or easy laughs.

This looks less like comedy and more like action drama on its tense, suspenseful build toward bloodshed.

But like the Dinner for Schmucks--and I won't spoil the movie by telling you how--this dinner with Jesus does not go at all as planned.

Jesus ruins the evening for everyone.

He watches the ones watching him, and reaches into their own wisdom tradition to mock and undermine their careful posturing and positioning.

Then he turns on his host and does essentially the same, insulting him and his guests alike with advice on how to throw a better banquet next time.

Perhaps this is why some folks are reluctant to invite church people to their parties.

Jesus has a way of ruining a good evening, of spoiling a good party with all that sacred, blood-stained guilt attached to his image and reputation.

You don't invite your principal or your parents to your high school keg party in the same way you don't invite Jesus, the earnest moral cop who looks so miserable dying for your sins, to any gathering where you intend to enjoy some of those sins.

But such a rejection of Jesus as party guest doesn't give him nearly enough credit.

He doesn't ruin parties by raising standards too high--he ruins parties by lowering them.

When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor.

Sit in the back and shut up; the party, like life, is not all about you.

When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Invite exactly the people you try to avoid, the people assumed in Jesus' times to be cursed and rejected by God, the people you quietly know are not worthy of your time.

Invite them not as sideshows or as objects of ridicule but as honored guests, as esteemed equals, because when you do, now you are on the verge of blessing.

Now you are on the cusp of behaving like God, who throws open God's home to those who cannot possibly repay and treats clearly inferior guests--that would be us--to a warm and lavish welcome.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

In biblical thought, if you are entertaining friends and family, it's not hospitality.

Hospitality is specifically for strangers, for sojourners, for onlookers and outsiders, for those who cannot and will not repay you.

Let mutual love continue, of course, but don't stop there.

Make the move to hospitality, from familiar to stranger, from the people you like to the people you don't know all the way to the people you do know and therefore don't like. It's an important biblical command for the church to remember, tempted as we so often are to abandon Christ for cliques, to neglect to show hospitality because we're too busy talking only to our friends or the people that we want to be our friends, people we perceive as having a better seat at life's table than we do.

It also cuts against another one of our most deadly temptations...the temptation we call charity. The poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame are those that we direct to service agencies where they can stand in line for society's scraps for which we callously expect them to be grateful.

They might get the canned food or the handout they need to survive, but it comes without the human community they need to *live*.

The poor are people, people who need the companionship of those around the table as much as, if not more than, the food that is served upon it.

The crippled are people, people with stories and feelings and hearts and gifts to share. The blind, the lame, the homeless and the hopeless are people, people who are created in the image of God with a dignity we cannot deny though Lord knows we sure try.

About a month from now, Resurrection will serve dinner with The Night Ministry. It will once again be our turn to help host the party.

You can sign up in the back after worship to make contributions, but as you do, please remember that we are not settling for charity.

We are giving a dinner.
We are hosting a banquet.

If you are bringing food, make sure it's quality enough that you would set it on your china before the guests at your Thanksgiving table.

If you are preparing the meal, make sure it's with as much care as you would give your friends or relatives or rich neighbors, because you are making dinner for angels.

If something isn't good enough for your children, how is it good enough for God's?
And if you are among those out on the sidewalk serving, eat and drink with your guests.

Don't trip into the trap of thinking you have plenty and they need the food more than you do, because what you and they both need is to stop using the words *you and they*, to stop the unconscious social positioning and distinction-making and to eat together as common humanity, esteemed and beloved equals in the eyes of God.

Hand someone a sandwich and then eat a sandwich with them, and you will be blessed, because neither of you can repay the God who invites us all.

This is the beautiful and hard truth we learn and receive and practice at Holy Communion. God's table is a place of welcome for friend and stranger, saint and sinner alike.

It's the place we return week after week, having wasted yet another seven days eating only with those we know or respect, to internalize the unwelcome challenge of Jesus to show real hospitality, not just reciprocal duty or empty charity.

At this sacred table we weasel forward, tails between our legs, painfully aware that we keep eating with the same people and keep ignoring the hard good news of God's wide welcome and compassionate concern--a love so deep and so thorough that it marches to the cross by way of dangerous dinner parties for people who would rather have God dead than disturbing our precious social order.

But even that death God turns into a festive, inclusive meal.

And at that meal, at this altar, God welcomes rich and poor, friend and stranger and foe, hero and hypocrite, every first and last one of us, including even the most unseemly losers...including even the people who fail to understand what the meal is all about, the people who receive this lavish grace and then spend the whole next week failing to repay it to anyone beyond their little social circles...yes, God welcomes and celebrates even the sorry, self-absorbed likes of us.

It's *Dinner for Schmucks* after all, and we are the guests of honor.