

Places of Honor



Luke 14:1,7-14

Year C Proper 17

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
■	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	■			▲
▲	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past	▲			●
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence	▲			
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	■			▲
▲	Chuza - the open-minded, intellectually curious manager of Herod's household		▲	●	▲
▲	Jesus		●	▲	
●	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		●	●	
▲	Pharisee - the host of the banquet and the husband of Susanna; a normally open minded man who invited Jesus to his house in the past, but who is oddly stressed out about having Jesus as his guest this time		▲	▲	▲
●	Wife - the longsuffering wife of a rude guest			●	
▲	Husband - a rude guest at the banquet			▲	
●	Man - a banquet guest who maneuvers himself into a good seat and refuses to give it up			●	
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus			●	■
▲	Susanna - the more conventionally-minded friend of Joanna, who, like her friend, left her home to become a disciple				▲

Scene 1

James , Mary , Peter , Phillip

{Peter, James, Mary, and Phillip are seated way in the back at a banquet at the home of a prominent Pharisee whose wife Susanna is one of the disciples.}

Peter *[to James]* So. Here we are again at Susanna's house, sitting way in the back just like before. Aren't you going to complain?

{James makes no answer, so Mary jumps in after a moment to break the tension.}

Mary I'm just happy to have a place at the table.

Phillip That's right. This is where we first met you, isn't it?

Mary Actually, I met the rabbi, and Peter and James, before that, and then I followed you all here hoping to speak to the rabbi again.

Phillip No kidding? I always wondered how it was you popped up out of nowhere that night.

Mary It was God's will.

Peter I have to admit it: you're right. I would never have thought a woman could make a good disciple, but you've been as loyal as anyone, and a harder worker than most.

Phillip *[to Peter]* So it was you that helped Mary find us and join us?

Peter Ha! Not exactly. Here's what I did: I tried to send her away!

Mary In all fairness, he didn't understand -

Peter *[taking responsibility]* No, no. No excuses. I was stupid, but now I know better!

Phillip *[to James]* What about you?

{James again makes no answer.}

Peter Never mind him. He's just grumpy because we didn't get to sit the head table.

James I am not!

Peter *[good naturedly]* The last time this happened, we didn't hear the end of it for months! What's the matter, did you learn your lesson?

James *[suddenly serious and intense]* This is what I learned: we're going to Jerusalem. Nothing else matters!

Phillip *[a little alarmed]* Oh my God, it's happening after all? When did things change?

{James makes no answer for a moment.}

Peter Come on, James, he's one of us. We can tell him.

Mary I don't even know what you're talking about.

Phillip A while back, the rabbi made up his mind to go to Jerusalem to...to claim his throne. Or that's what Judas and James and John thought. And then something happened, and suddenly, we weren't going after all. But now, I guess we are?

Peter That's what James and John and Judas think.

James The rabbi's been asking Judas to make sure we have enough money to get to Jerusalem, but saying nothing about money after that. And you may all have noticed how he's been scolding the crowds lately, and alienating potential donors. It all adds up: We don't need any more money, and there's no more time for people to dilly dally about whether they're going to join us. The Day is at hand.

Phillip *[still uneasy]* Oh, my. I thought we'd be spared after all.

Mary I don't understand. Why would you fear that day?

Peter *[relishing the prospect]* Because there might be a fight! Come on, Phillip, buck up! You can stand right next to me in the battle if it'll make you feel any safer.

James What I don't understand is why we came *here*.

Phillip We were invited.

James He's been turning down all kinds of invitations lately if they took us off the path to Jerusalem. This is the biggest detour yet.

Peter Well, it's special. This is Susanna's home and Joanna's home town. Maybe they'll even decide to stay with their husbands when we leave. Or maybe we'll get some more donations from them.

James *[a little agitated]* But we don't need any more money, from them or their rich friends. Look at all these polite society people! Did you notice all that jockeying to sit near the rabbi at the start of the banquet? The Day is coming when he'll sit on his throne! And then we'll see who's sitting at his left hand and his right.

Scene 2

Chuza , Jesus , Judas , Pharisee

{Jesus and the rest of the disciples sit at the head table, along with their Pharisee host and his wife Susanna, and her friend Joanna, who also ran off to join the disciples after the last banquet, and her husband Chuza.}

Chuza *[raising his glass]* Rabbi, we want to thank you for returning our wives safe and sound!

Jesus *[simply]* I returned nothing. They come and go as they please. I should thank *you* for letting them join us.

Chuza *[gallantly]* There's nothing to thank us for, either. As you say: they come and go as they please. Like an elusive breeze on a sweltering day. Like happiness.

Judas Was the going that rough, then?

Chuza Oh, there were days I was sure the world was coming to an end! *[to the Pharisee]* Isn't that true? *[but the Pharisee makes no reply]* Benjamin? Benjamin!

Pharisee *[snapping out of his distracted state]* Sorry! I...I have a lot on my mind.

Chuza But the party's going wonderfully! Susanna returned and took up the organizing with all her old aplomb, as if she had never left. You have nothing to worry about.

Pharisee Of course, of course. *[nervously to Jesus]* I thank you for accepting my invitation once again. I wasn't expecting it.

Jesus If you weren't expecting us to accept, why did you invite us?

Pharisee *[as if he had been caught out in a lie]* Oh! Well...you see...I just thought...

Judas To tell you the truth, I was a little surprised, too. *[to Jesus]* This *is* a little out of our way, isn't it?

Jesus All roads eventually lead everywhere.

Chuza Well, rabbi, what will you be preaching about tonight?

Pharisee *[blurting it out]* Nothing! *[after an awkward pause, continuing more discretely]* I mean, there's no need to trouble yourself, rabbi. I sought only the pleasure of your company tonight.

Chuza Well, I certainly don't want to impose on him, but after all, preaching is his mission. He might wish to do it.

Judas What about it, rabbi?

Scene 3

Chuza , Husband , Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Man , Pharisee , Wife

{Before Jesus can answer, a commotion breaks out as a man and his wife approach the head table.}

Wife Please, dear!

Husband *[angrily]* No! We were promised, and I'm going to see that that promise is kept!

Wife *[to the group at the table]* I'm sorry!

Husband Benjamin!

Pharisee *[startled from his mysterious preoccupation]* What? What's wrong?

Husband You promised us a seat at this table!

Chuza *[to Joanna]* This again!

Pharisee Did I? I can't remember...

Husband You can't remember? I was right there when you were writing the invitation to the Rabbi. You told me, before you had invited anybody else, before you invited *him*, that I could sit with him at this table.

Pharisee I'm so sorry. We had more acceptances than we expected, and I must have forgotten.

Wife *[trying to change the subject]* It's all right. We understand. Why, just last month, I -

Husband *[recognizing one of the men at the table]* You! You can't have been promised a place here. Everyone thought you were out of town!

Man I was. I returned just today.

Husband How is it that you're sitting at this table - in *my* seat basically! I insist you move!

Man I got here an hour early to secure this place!

Joanna *[to Chuza]* We should do something.

Husband You're nothing but a party crasher! *[to the Pharisee]* How can you as the host allow something like this?

Pharisee Please, please, everybody! Please, not tonight of all nights!

Chuza Excuse me. You and your wife are welcome to our places.

Husband What? Uh...but...

Wife Thank you so much.

Joanna It's all right. *[to Chuza]* Let's go sit with James and Peter, like before.

Husband Well, things are finally making sense around here.

{Jesus unexpectedly rises from his place.}

Jesus *[to the crowd, in his preaching voice]* Hear me!

Wife We're just in time for the sermon!

Pharisee *[in an urgent whisper]* Rabbi, no! Please!

Jesus When you're invited to a banquet like this one, don't be vying for the seats of honor. For one thing, you might not be the bigshot you think you are. You might take a seat at the head table, only to be told by the host, "Get out of that seat! It's reserved for someone important!" Instead, sit way in the back, as far back as you can. Then, you can only move up! And if the host comes to you and says, "What are you doing way back here? Come on up to the head table," imagine the honor that will accrue to you in the sight of all the other guests!

Joanna *[to Chuza and Judas]* Is he being sarcastic?

Judas He's been in an odd mood.

Jesus *[looking at the Pharisee but continuing the sermon]* And you! The next time you throw a party, you'll be better off inviting the poor, the crippled, and the blind. They won't be able to repay you, but you'll be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Plus, they'll behave much better than this lot!

{The crowd erupts into angry shouts and murmurs.}

Scene 4

Chuza , James , Joanna , Mary , Peter , Pharisee , Susanna

{Susanna brings Joanna and Chuza over to James and Peter's table.}

Peter Hello!

Chuza Yes, it's us, your tablemates from the past.

Susanna Can they sit here?

James Of course. We'd be honored.

Peter Weren't you sitting at the head table?

Chuza We were, but a ridiculous dispute arose about the seating, and we thought it would be best to retreat.

James So that's why he preached what he did!

Peter He really gave it to them!

Joanna It was a strange sermon.

Susanna I thought it was wonderful. Maybe the best I've heard him preach.

Chuza Really? You've been traveling with him all these months and this was the best?

Susanna It was so sensible. I'm afraid his sermons usually go right over my head!

Peter Mine, too! I'm glad to hear someone else say it!

Chuza *[to Joanna]* But you didn't like the sermon as much.

Joanna No. *[to James and Peter]* Sorry! It's just my opinion. *[to everybody]* I'm afraid I've been having problems with all his sermons. When I first joined him, I thought he'd be more...idealistic, philosophical. I thought his sermons would call people to higher principles. And they sometimes did, especially at first, but...they've changed. I don't know what to make of them any more. Tonight's, for example...

James It was pretty clear to me, and it was all *about* higher principles. Don't put yourself forward. Be humble. What's so hard about that?

Joanna What's puzzling is the why. Why shouldn't you put yourself forward? Apparently, not because it's bad for your soul, but because it can backfire. Why should you be humble? Not because it's a good way to be, but because you can maybe gain even

greater glory if you play it modestly at first. It seems so...calculating.

Peter Wow, I didn't think about it that way.

Susanna He's just speaking to the people here in a language they'll understand.

Chuza It certainly had an effect on them. I'm just not sure if it's the effect he wanted.

James Actually, it is. He's been doing this for several weeks now. And there's a reason.

{Chuza, Joanna, and Susanna, wait for James to go on, but he delays for a bit.}

Peter Come on, James. You can tell Chuza. He's Joanna's husband.

Joanna And your biggest donor.

James All right, here it is. The rabbi has set his sights on Jerusalem, on claiming his throne at last. The great Day is coming!

Chuza Heavens!

Mary *[mostly to Joanna]* Peter thinks there might be fighting.

Susanna Fighting?

Peter You don't think the Romans are going to just walk away, do you?

{A silence falls as everybody ponders that. Then the Pharisee comes running up to the table.}

Pharisee *[to James and Peter]* You have to tell your rabbi not to preach again! I tried convincing your compatriots, but they just brushed me off.

James We're sorry. He's been...in an unusual state.

Pharisee Well, snap him out of it! I can't have him preaching again tonight.

Peter I don't get it. He preached the last time we were here and it was fine. Preaching is what he does. Why did you invite him if you didn't want him to preach?

Pharisee *[finally admitting his secret]* I DIDN'T INVITE HIM!

{A stunned silence.}

Pharisee Okay, I invited him, but it wasn't my idea. It wasn't my *agenda*.

Chuza What can you mean?

Pharisee [*after a look around to make sure no one's listening in*] I was *told* to invite him. *Ordered to!* By my superiors. Because they're getting worried about him. They wanted to observe him.

Joanna Benjamin, how could you?

Pharisee I had no choice! I'm risking arrest just telling you now.

James Thanks for the warning. And don't worry, it's not unexpected.

Peter And nothing we can't handle.

Pharisee Well, you know your own business best. But please, could you take it out of my house?

James Of course. Thanks again.

{The Pharisee exits.}

Susanna [*steeling herself to make a big announcement*] I meant to tell you earlier. I'm not going with you when you leave. We discussed it and decided it would be best if I stayed behind.

Peter That's all right. A battle is no place for a woman.

Joanna [*to Mary*] But I guessing you'll go on.

Mary Where else do I have to go?

Peter [*to Joanna*] What about you?

Joanna [*to Chuza, after an awkward pause*] My love? I think I'm changing my mind.

Chuza [*shocked and stern*] No!

Joanna [*to everybody*] We also had a talk - about my dissatisfaction with the rabbi - and I decided to stay home as well. But this changes things. [*to Chuza*] I have to see it through now. You understand, don't you?

Chuza [*sighing, but with affection*] The wind blows where it will. I will climb to a high place and wait for its return, my face lifted to the sky.

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Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com