“Whose banquet are we hosting?”
Reflection on Luke 14:1, 7–14

In the Philippines today, a scandal is unfolding around ghost flood control projects. Public money meant to protect communities from deadly floods was pocketed by contractors and officials. Entire neighborhoods remain vulnerable to disaster, while those entrusted to safeguard them enrich themselves.

What makes this even more troubling is that many of the accused are not outsiders to religion. They are visible in churches—sitting in front pews, attending services faithfully, donating to church projects, sponsoring festivals. Their names appear on plaques and cornerstones, praised as “benefactors of the faith.” Yet their generosity is a mask for corruption, their piety a cover for injustice.

This reality is not unique to the Philippines. In Europe too, churches have been recipients of generous donations from large companies and wealthy families. Cathedrals are restored, schools funded, charities endowed. But we must ask: where does the money come from? Too often, these fortunes are built on profits extracted from the Global South—through mining that destroys mountains, plantations that exploit cheap labor, and trade systems that keep farmers poor. Communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America remain vulnerable, while wealth flows northward. And some of that wealth, cleansed through charitable giving, ends up in the treasuries of European churches. The donors are honored, but the poor who paid the true cost remain invisible.

It is precisely into such realities that today’s Gospel speaks. Jesus is invited to dine at the house of a Pharisee, a man of prominence in his community. He notices how guests scramble for the best seats, the places of honor. He warns: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” And to his host, he says: “When you give a banquet, do not invite your friends or your relatives or your rich neighbors… But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

The warning is not just about personal humility. It is a challenge to the whole system of honor and privilege that dominates human society—and that too often shapes our churches. How easily we invite, recognize, and honor those who can give back. How quickly we place at the head tables those whose wealth sustains our buildings and projects. And how quietly we push the poor to the margins, or keep them outside the banquet altogether.

This is where churches and church leaders must examine themselves. Do we bless the corrupt when they donate, even as their actions destroy the lives of the vulnerable? Do we name our halls and chapels after companies whose profits are extracted from the sweat of the Global South? Do we accept gifts without asking what price was paid by others to make such wealth possible? If so, then we mirror not the banquet of God, but the banquets of the Pharisees.

Jesus' teaching cuts through the heart of this. True blessing does not come from associating with the powerful or honoring the wealthy. It comes from inviting those who cannot repay us—the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten. It comes from shaping communities where the powerless are given dignity, and where justice matters more than prestige.

This does not mean rejecting generosity altogether. Churches do need resources to carry out their mission. But it does mean practicing discernment, courage, and integrity. Not every gift is a blessing if it comes at the expense of the poor. Not every benefactor deserves honor if their wealth was built on exploitation. The Church's calling is not to be indebted to power, but to stand with the powerless.

The scandal of flood control projects in the Philippines is one example; the wealth of European businesses profiting from the Global South is another. Both expose the same danger: when churches accept and honor money uncritically, we risk betraying the very Gospel we proclaim. We risk confusing generosity with justice, prestige with holiness, appearances with truth.

But Jesus also gives hope. He offers a vision of the banquet of God, where the poor are welcomed, the humble are lifted, and the mighty are called to account. This banquet is not about repayment, but about grace. It is not about display, but about love. It is not about sustaining privilege, but about creating community.

For us as church leaders and members, the question is urgent: whose banquet are we hosting? Whose values are we reflecting in our gatherings, our recognitions, our partnerships? Do we reflect the world's obsession with wealth and power, or God's passion for justice and humility?

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." These words are not just for ambitious individuals—they are for churches too. A church that exalts itself by courting the powerful will one day be humbled. But a church that humbles itself by serving the poor and standing with the oppressed will be exalted in the Kingdom of God.

The call is clear. Whether in Manila or in Stuttgart, whether in cathedrals or in barrio chapels, the Church is summoned to re-examine its tables. To ask not only who is invited, but who is missing. To measure not only the size of our donations, but the integrity of our witness. To stop blessing injustice and instead to embody the banquet of God—where the least are honored and the last are welcomed first.

For in the end, what matters is not whose name is engraved on our walls, but whose lives are lifted by our faithfulness. And in that faithfulness lies the true blessing: not honor from the world, but the promise of resurrection from the Lord of the banquet.
Amen.