

Pastor's Message – 8/28/22  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

I recall a cartoon of two men arriving in heaven at the very same time. Saint Peter tells them tactfully that there is a place for only one of them in the heavenly kingdom. To make the choice, Saint Peter asks, "Which of you is the most humble?"

Humility is one of those more slippery human traits. Humility is one of the hardest talents for a Christian to learn. Jesus taught us that we are social, and, on occasion, we forget how vital it is to be a servant to others.

In our Bible reading for today, Luke sets the scene and the tone of this long banquet scene in the opening verse of chapter 14. Jesus has been invited to dine at the house of a Pharisee. It was the Sabbath, and "they were watching him closely." The setting and seating that occur at this meal suggest that this Pharisee-host was fairly rich and considered a citizen of significant social status. His banquets, after all, are important enough to merit being "seen" at and for seeing others.

It would be fascinating to know where Jesus chose to sit at this meal. On one hand, if the host had directed Jesus to sit in the place of honor, then Jesus could have watched the guests attempt to sit as close as possible both to him and to the host. On the other hand, if Jesus wasn't seated in the most honored place, then he could have observed the sycophant lawyers and Pharisees compete for seats near the host since he was "a leader of the Pharisees."

We don't know, of course, but Jesus may have simply been one of several rabbis invited that day to the home of the "leader of the Pharisees." Although it perhaps stretches credulity to believe that's what actually happened, the parable seems even more compelling if Jesus didn't sit in the place of honor. From that peripheral vantage point, he could both observe and challenge the vanity-driven dinner guests since he -- unlike them -- had acted with proper comportment by neither seeking nor presuming to take a seat of honor.

It would seem that Jesus is Mr. Manners, a masculine version of Emily Post or perhaps a wedding planner. We see him here giving seating instructions at a dinner party. His advice helps the guests not only to avoid humiliation, but to practice humility, and in the process, snatch

some honor for themselves. First, sit at the lowest place (farthest from the host table), he recommends, so that you might be exalted and honored - rather than seeking the highest place and risk being moved for someone more important.

This might be read as "Don't honor yourself more than others do" or "Let the host shower you with public admiration by leading you to a better seat."

Jesus summarizes his etiquette advice in this way, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

This affects all of us. We all want to be well-liked and respected and thought well of. Achievement, recognition, the applause of others -- and yes, even the tangible rewards of money and property -- all of these may occupy too much of our attention throughout our waking hours (and even our dreams). Rather than scrambling to the top tier of the world's medal dais, Jesus suggests that we take the lowest place.

Our reading should make us wonder what our motivations are and how we act on those motivations. Where do you sit at a meal when you're a prominent guest or think you might be?

Jesus offers his angle in this week's reading from Luke.

We still have a practice similar to the scene Jesus described — the "head table" at award dinners, company banquets, weddings, or other social occasions. The person or persons at the center of the head table are "the most honored" at any given banquet. If you're "somebody," you would expect and seek to be as close to the seats of highest honor as possible.

In this week's reading, Jesus turns all of this on its head.

In our Bible passage today, Jesus is teaching us about manners: about Kingdom manners. In Jesus' time, social relationships were shaped by codes of honor and shame. People were to know and accept their place in society. If you were told to give up an honored place at the table, you would bring shame on yourself and on your host. Today, it would still be embarrassing.

"When you are invited [to a party]," Jesus says, "go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you" (v. 10).

Of course, what our culture is teaching is really quite different. Children want trophies for *participating* in sports, not just for winning tournaments. Parents expect their kids to be admitted to Ivy League colleges, even though only one in ten will get in. College students want A's, not because they have studied hard and learned a lot, but because they have showed up for class and paid \$3,000 for it. Basketball players go to prestigious universities not because they want a first-class education, but because they want to play a year and then jump to the NBA.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is a countercultural game to play, one that is based on the belief that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 11). Anything we do to serve others without expectation of a payback will be seen as a success in the eyes of Jesus and will move us closer to the Humility Hall of Fame -- or, in the words of Scripture, to "the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 14).

Jesus has concern for feeding the hungry, especially those who have no way to repay our generosity. He says, "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" (v. 12).

How many of us do that? Most of us give luncheons or dinners for precisely the groups that Jesus mentions: friends, family members, relatives, neighbors. We enjoy feeding them and then being fed by them.

However, Jesus says to go a different direction. Think of hungry children, whether they are two or twenty-two million. "When you give a banquet," he says, "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" (v. 13-14).

Feed those who cannot repay you, commands Jesus. The poor who live in cheap motels without kitchens. The crippled who have trouble entering most rooms with their wheelchairs. The lame who need to have meals brought to them. The blind who are often stuck at home because travel is so difficult.

Make lunch or dinner for *these* people, suggests Jesus. Not for the folks who easily pay you back with a lunch or dinner of their own. And don't just make it a meal -- make it a banquet, a celebration.

Jesus turns our normal operations on their head. Whoever you are or think you may be, seek the very *lowest* seat, Jesus says, and let others raise you where they want you to be.

Why? In the kingdom of God, honor is a *gift granted* by another rather than a *right earned* by oneself.

This is also valuable when we're sent on mission. We are to presume no privilege in the house or community of another. What we have to offer is what is asked of us. What we receive is what is given to us.

Our world is about standing in line and waiting our turn. When we go to the store or the bank, if we need to pay our respects at the funeral home, if we are eager to congratulate the bride, we stand in line. It's only fair.

Sometimes however, it isn't fair. Sometimes people cheat. Some of them cut in. Others get the VIP treatment and go right to the front. Sometimes those who are last in line truly are the least important, truly are forgotten, and truly are the last.

Jesus comes and stands in the back of the line, behind the forgotten, behind the unimportant, far away from the VIPs, and calls us all to turn around. In Jesus, the back of the line is now the front. Jesus isn't fair. Jesus cheats on our behalf.

Followers of Jesus don't have to worry about getting what they think they deserve. Disciples of Jesus do not have to exercise their rights to get what they need. Disciples of Jesus don't have to demand what's coming to them because what's coming, as a result of our selfishness and self-centeredness and arrogance and lack of humility, is what's been removed.

And since Jesus has given us an example of servanthood, looking to the needs of others and the needs of those who have not, we must do the same. Jesus denies that God is looking for human perfection -- for only those who are healthy and whole and clean and beautiful. Jesus stuns his listeners by asserting that the coming kingdom of God will reveal these outcast, humbled humans as among God's favorite, the most exalted. Ignoring others puts us at the back of the line when forgiveness and salvation are offered but at the front for those who believe and act.