

Choosing Humility

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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When I was a child, I spent a good deal of time with my maternal grandmother. As a child, she was raised a Southern Baptist in Ripley, Tennessee. My grandfather spent a good deal of time serving in the army and moving from one country to another, so over the years my Grandmother's southern accent became a sound unique to her. When she was annoyed with me, or one of my sisters or cousins, she would look at us and say: "yoouuuuu need to be umble!" She'd drop the "h" and roll the "u," and we need we needed to pay attention!

Jesus offers a similar lesson in our Gospel reading this morning, and we need to pay attention. Once again, the lectionary has given us a wisdom teaching of Jesus to consider. This time it is: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This wisdom saying is found in an interesting context. Jesus is at the house of a Pharisee for a Sabbath meal. This is an important meal in the Jewish tradition. Much like our Sunday morning gathering, the Sabbath meal is the time when followers gather to be together, remember who they are as people of faith, and reflect on the story of God's love for us. In our text, Jesus is at the home of an important man – the text tells us this by indicating that the man is a Pharisee. Pharisees were educated religious leaders in Jesus' era and were strong keepers of Jewish traditions. While Jesus is eating with them, he stirs up the dinner table conversation. Jesus notes how the guests chose the places of honor for their seating at the table. It is pretty clear that during the 1st century people knew what place they belonged on the social political ladder. This extended to the dinner table, where people of power sat at the head of the table. Other people probably spent some time trying to get close to the leaders at the top of the table. It felt insulting and humbling to sit at the lower end of the banquet table.

Jesus, in his typical fashion, tells a parable explaining that when you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't sit in the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished comes along and you have to be moved by the host. It is better to sit at the lower end of the table and be invited by the host to move toward the top. In that way, you will be honored. In addition, Jesus teaches that when you're giving a dinner party, don't invite people who will repay you. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. By doing so, you will be blessed and repaid at the resurrection of the righteous: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

In our text, Jesus is warning the powerful to be careful about how they use their power. He does this by sharing two stories about food. In the first century, those who had food were the wealthy and the powerful. Only five percent of society were wealthy enough to store quantities of food, while ninety-five percent were serfs who worked for the wealthy. Food was a huge issue. To have the ability to give a banquet for friends and family meant you were in the top social bracket.

But for Jesus, this was insignificant, unless you were willing to hold your power lightly and with humility.

This past week has been filled with examples of people and power. Events in Syria, Egypt and the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I had a Dream" speech could all offer examples for this sermon. However, in this Gospel story, Jesus is talking about everyday events of people sitting down together at a Sabbath table. This story is not about national politics, it is about every day people like you and me and how we use our power.

People use their power over others everyday. It happens all around our town in big and small ways. I was in CVS early this week because I needed to pick up some allergy medicine. As I waited in line, I noticed the woman ahead of me who was being served by the CVS clerk. As she proceeded to check out, she was incredibly rude to the young woman behind the counter, accusing her of taking her debit card that she had misplaced and then found. She snapped at the clerk about every detail that was needed in the transaction while the clerk patiently guided her through the process. The customer's rudeness was astonishing. In this instance, she was the one with power and her use of it was ugly. All the clerk could do was endure the criticism and accusations.

Jesus invites us to a different way of being of the way of humility and graciousness.

Jesus also invites us to sit at the bottom of the table. Interesting things happen when we sit with those who are powerless. We often get to know who we really are.

One year when I was in seminary at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, probably 1982, a group of us went into downtown Atlanta to serve a meal at a soup kitchen. I had never done this before and I found myself behind a large tray of food serving those who came through the line. Toward the end of the meal a large, rather intimidating man in about his mid-twenties came through the line. As I served him, he asked if I would come and sit with him while he ate. I was surprised, but agreed to leave my post. As the man ate, he told me his story about how and why he was homeless and hungry. I do not remember the details, but I do remember listening to him as he shared. When he was done eating and talking, he looked up at me and said: "I just wanted someone to listen to me." Some time later, I realized this man gave me an enormous blessing by pointing out an important aspect of my vocation as a minister: I am called to listen to those who show up.

When we sit at the lower places at the table, we learn about our true selves.

Perhaps the most important message from our passage today is that God invites everyone to the banquet. God's banquet isn't just for those who are powerful and have the food - it is for all who live.

In mid-August, Bob and I drove up to New Hampshire for a few days of vacation. I was to preach at an outdoor chapel on Squam Lake, and some of my family members were gathering for a bit of a family reunion. On the way, we stopped at a rest area. When I got in line at the women's room, I found myself standing behind a Muslim woman. I realized that she was connected to the young boy who was standing by the outside door, obviously waiting for someone. The woman, who was a bit younger than I, was dressed in a black hijab, a traditional

head scarf, and a long, black hajar, the traditional dress. She was a stark contrast to the many American women surrounding her, some of whom had hardly anything on. As I waited in line, it became clear to me that the woman was tense and uncomfortable. Many women stared, even glared at her as they passed her walking to the sinks. At one moment, she called out in a foreign language to make sure the young boy was still by the door. When she got to the head of the line, even though some stalls were empty, she did not move toward them. It made people behind her impatient and I could feel the tension rising in the room. I didn't want to be rude, so I waited, but I was also wondering what was going on. One woman behind us just pushed past us and took her turn. Then, a stall door opened and a young woman, obviously an older daughter or related family member, came out. The woman ahead of me nodded to the younger woman, called out to the young man at the door, and then moved toward a stall. Then I knew what was going on: the woman was watching for her son. This woman, who had Muslim, stranger, foreigner written all over her, was a mother just like me. She was not going to take care of herself until she took care of her child.

This is what Jesus is trying to help us understand in the Gospel this morning. At God's table, we are the same. There are no strangers at God's banquet. We are mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, kings and servants, rich and poor, but we are all invited to God's banquet of life.

May our eyes be opened to the beauty and wonder of God's story among us. Amen.

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