

Oh, the Humility

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1,7-14

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I must admit, I was pretty impressed with myself. I received an invite to a swanky benefit dinner in New York City on Park Ave. I was making connections, eating tasty food, and listening to inspiring speakers. An important cause, important people, an important place: it all made me feel...very important.

All was going well. After hor d'oeuvres and drinks, we sat down to eat. I worked my way through the salad and entrée when the gentleman to my right asked if he could have my roll. I said, "I'm sorry, but I finished mine." Without saying a word, he just pointed with his fork to the left side of my plate, where lo and behold, there was a roll. In a state of shock, I passed it to him. I turned to my friend Zoe, who shook her head, shaped her left fingers into a "b" and her right fingers into a "d." "Bread. Drink," she said. Oh, the embarrassment. Oh, the humility. I forgot on which side my roll belonged. Humbled by the mere wag of the fork!

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus loves mixing it up at the dinner table and did not always abide by conventional manners. No other dinner guest in the Holy Land was generating the same buzz, although Jesus was known more for his *notoriety* than his *popularity* at meals. In chapter seven of Luke's gospel, Jesus notes that people were calling him a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." He made a habit of staying late and attracting undesirable friends. In fact, in the scripture we left out this morning, he healed a man on the Sabbath, which last week's lesson taught was a social faux pas. In at least seven other of Luke's meal scenes, Jesus was unafraid to leverage the setting to teach his radical table etiquette—this passage, of course, is no different.

Jesus wants to teach them about humility and uses the example of a first-century Palestinian wedding to illustrate his point. The meal was essentially a big party for the groom, entertained by guests who all sat on a circle of couches. The couches closest to him at the center were the most prestigious. Similar to gatherings today, high profile guests would make a splash, arriving late. The groom would give them a seat closest to him at the center and the guests of lesser prominence would be pushed farther away.

Jesus' advice, on its face, is very shrewd. Show some humility at the start and you will avoid embarrassment and possibly even get called up to a nicer seat. It is good manners. It is akin to knowing which sides of your plate your bread and drink belong.

However, Jesus, ever living and preaching the message of God's kin-dom, is advocating for a humility that extends beyond good manners. It is humility in its truest sense, to lower oneself and draw oneself closer to the lowliest.

According to the late Christian ethicist and UCC pastor, James Gustafson, Jesus's ministry is always encouraging us to see the bigger picture. He believes that human beings are prone to seeing the world through a narrow lens. We correctly see the world a mass of finite resources, but fail to see the collective impact of our actions. Too often we hoard resources and falsely believe that there will never be enough to go around. For Gustafson, the aim of the Christian life is to see the world as God does and embrace our interdependence, all for God's glory.

Doing so requires the humility to give up notions that the value in our life comes from scaling the social ladder and jockeying for status. Humility is not a form of deception to game the first-century wedding feast we call life. True humility glorifies God rather than ourselves and draws us closer to the kin-dom. True humility allows us to see whom the game leaves out, "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind," and invites them to participate. True humility grounds us to see our own worth as children of God and instills us with confidence to take our rightful seat and enjoy the fruits of God's table. We can celebrate the successes of others and trust there are plenty of winnings to go around. When last shall be first and first shall be last, as it is in the kin-dom, we all end up in the same place.

In the meantime, we live in a world where humility is scarce, rules are twisted, and there is hardly enough sympathy for the least among us. To use some good old fashion theological language: sin abounds. Both our personal sins and the sins of others construct a reality where there are just not enough good seats. The paradox of the kin-dom is that none of us can have a good view until all are equally welcome at the table.

Embracing our humility and consequently our interdependence is not all stick and no carrot. It transforms the lives of those who share out of their abundance and those who feel as if they are running on empty. Humility's transformation can be so stark that we can even forget who started as which.

The transformative humility story I want to share with you now is one of my favorites. Those of you who were on the search committee that called me have already heard it, and that's OK. Spend enough time with me and you will likely hear it again!

It begins in my hometown back in Maine. It is a town that has had some tough luck. Finding a job there isn't easy: the mills have been gone for well over 20 years and almost all of the manufacturing has dried up. Most people who do have a job can hardly remember the last time they had a raise.

My home church struggled, too. Budgets were shrinking, attendance was down, and relations with the last three pastors were rocky.

Then a few congregants got together, you know, the types who had already served on every committee multiple times and helped out with all the fundraisers. They decided it was time for something

different. Rather than having a potluck dinner every month to help pay the bills, they decided to host a free community dinner every month.

Returning home with a semester of seminary under my belt, my mother, father and I went to the dinner. The three of us served the baked ham, macaroni, and green beans, and Bruce passed out his homemade brownies at the dessert table. That night our tiny congregation fed and ate with over a hundred guests. Times in my town were tough, and it showed on the faces and clothes of the rural poor, elderly and lonely who entered our doors.

Before I sat down to eat, I went over to Bruce for a brownie. Handing me one, he leaned in and whispered, "You know...this is where you meet Jesus." That flinty retired railroad worker named the mystery of how the Holy Spirit drew us together to commune at Christ's communion table that night. Bruce knew the Spirit moves through our humility. Believe it or not, a florescent-lit church basement was the place to be that Friday night. Some of us humbled ourselves by passing up something more glamorous, others by claiming their worth as people deserving of a warm meal and companionship.

That church still hosts their free community suppers once a month. Some of the attendees even joined the church. Things in town are still hard, yet things are starting to turn around. The church had to humble itself to survive, and the humbling helped them get back to the core of who they are. They may no longer be a hub for young professionals and their children. They are, however, a community where one can encounter Christ by sitting and eating with the parts of ourselves for whom society cares too little.

It is a place where Jesus stands at the table inviting us to humility. He has ruffled some feathers and made us think again about our priorities. He offers enough bread to satisfy and a cup that you can refill again and again, so long as we can lower ourselves to share. In that is a sound hope for us all to be lifted up.

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