

Sept. 1, 2019

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Prayer: Dear Lord, we delight in the knowledge that you join us for worship in this place. We pray that our worship pleases you. We pray that the following words reflect your meaning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Seats in the Kingdom

When I was an 8-year-old Girl Scout, we had to learn how to set a table properly.

Napkins to the farthest outside left. Salad forks on the far left, dinner forks on the near left.

Knives on the near right, with blade pointed toward the plate. Spoons on the far right.

That was my first and last formal instruction in table etiquette.

I never folded a napkin like a boat or a bird.

I never made a centerpiece out of pears and pine cones and driftwood.

I have yet to write a place card.

Martha Stewart would not give me the time of day.

And so it came as something of a shock to me when I read about our Lord Jesus giving what it sounds like are etiquette tips. And indeed, that is how today's Scripture passage has sometimes been interpreted – as if Jesus were some ancient world Emily Post.

As we noted last week, at this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem where he would be executed. This entire middle section of Luke is chock-full of Jesus' teachings.

As chapter 14 opens, he and his disciples have accepted an invitation to dinner at a Pharisee's house. Dining together, sitting at table, breaking bread together, was a major social event in biblical times, probably even more so than it is in ours.

Luke sets four different teaching blocks during this one dinner. We are going to look at two of the teaching blocks this morning.

So please turn to Luke 14 and let's take a look at this odd little passage.

Luke 14: 1, 7-14.

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. ...

(skip to verse 7)

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

⁸When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

¹⁰But when you are invited, 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.

¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, '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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

The first teaching block concerns the seating arrangement; the second concerns the guest list.

We'll start with the first, which is the one I think has been misunderstood. On its face, it can certainly be read as pretty good advice for winning friends and influencing people.

It sounds as if Jesus is advising people how to avoid embarrassment when dining out. *Don't presume to sit on the stage. You might get asked to step down and sit near the kitchen door.*

Instead, sit near the kitchen door, and you just might get invited to move to a better seat.

But I think we know enough about Jesus and about Luke to suspect they might not be interested in our social graces. The first hint about this passage comes in its introduction:

“When (Jesus) noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.”

So this is a parable. It doesn't sound like a parable, does it? Sounds like straightforward instruction.

But the fact that Jesus called it a parable alerts us to the fact it's not a social tidbit after all. And the way he ends the parable lets us know he intends something else entirely.

Because here's the way it ends: **“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

Ohhhhh. He's up to something. For we've seen this proclamation many times before. Matthew, Mark and Luke use several variations on this statement to conclude teaching sections by Jesus.

In Matthew, the disciples came to Jesus, asking, **“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”** (Mt. 18: 1)

Jesus responded by calling a child, and placing him in the midst of the disciples. Then he said, **“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** (Mt. 18: 4)

Another time, Matthew told about the mother of James and John coming to Jesus. She asked that her sons be given the privilege of sitting on his right and left hand in the kingdom. Kind of an ancient world pageant mom.

Jesus's response was: **“Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.”** (Mt. 20: 26)

Mark told a story about the disciples themselves arguing over which one was the greatest. Jesus overheard them, and responded, **“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”** (Mark 9:35)

Luke himself uses the statement again when he tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Two men went to pray in the temple. The Pharisee basically prayed a prayer of thanksgiving that he was so good and honorable, while the tax collector confessed that he was an unworthy sinner.

The tax collector went home justified, Jesus said, **“for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”** (Luke 18: 14)

Those are the exact words Jesus uses after the conversation about where to sit at a dinner.

Clearly, Jesus talked about this reversal of societal order, societal expectations, a lot. If he were with us today, we would call it his *talking point*. For us to have this many recorded statements in our gospels, he must have said similar things in a great many settings, a great many sermons, a great many conversations.

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

With this kind of repetition on the part of our Lord, I’d say this is something we ought to pay attention to. Jesus was using the parable of sitting in places of honor at a dinner as a set-up, a metaphor, for this larger idea of kingdom living.

Those who live in the kingdom do not celebrate self. They humble self. They rein in self. If necessary, they put self in a headlock, a choke hold. They do not suppose they should sit in the seat of honor.

But humility must be real. Jesus is not calling us to false modesty or a wily strategy. *I will choose a lowly position while keeping my eyes peeled for someone in authority to recognize me for my humility.*

That is a foolish, cartoonish reading of this text. Jesus' call is for us to genuinely humble our sense of self so that our Lord can take up residence. For when an oversized ego is raging inside us, there is no room for God.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Imagine that. A religion that calls on us, even commands us, to be humble. This is a direct indictment of Christian triumphalism, Christian imperialism, Christian political posturing.

This is a direct indictment of the prosperity gospel.

This is a direct indictment of leaders who thinly veil themselves with the name Christian and behave with braggadocio and arrogance and bullying.

We would do well to carry this humility part of our gospel when we take it to the ends of the earth, as directed in Matthew's Great Commission.

Instead, humility is a piece that is conveniently forgotten, conveniently left behind in our rush to make Christianity dominant or to tie it to nationalism. When in fact, it was meant to be a religion of humility rather than grandeur.

The one we follow steadfastly refused to overthrow the Roman Empire, and instead died under it as a common criminal.

Our hero should be the quiet Christian mystic rather than the loud stadium preacher who confuses Christianity with America.

In the second teaching block of today's Scripture passage, Jesus turned to the host of the dinner and said, **“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. But when you give a banquet, 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.”**

He was still talking about kingdom living. Kingdom living incorporates the inclusion, the welcome, of those on earth whom society ignores.

More than any other writer, Luke gives us this picture of a Jesus vitally concerned with inclusion. You may remember Luke's description of Jesus's first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. He stood and read from the scroll of Isaiah:

**“ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me**

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

And recovery of sight to the blind,

To let the oppressed go free....' ” (Luke 4: 18)

The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. This is shorthand for all those who need help, all those who aren't going to be able to repay the invitation.

But the reading of this passage can be corporate, not just individual.

Can a church operate in the manner of a host who invites only those who can repay the invitation?

Can a church seek out only those with money, with resources, with transportation? Seek out only those who are, in turn, able to support the church?

Sure it can. And I think we need to resist that at every step, to refuse to take the easy way of inviting those with resources while making those with less feel less than.

That is why our communion table this morning will be open to everyone. We believe that Jesus wants us to invite everyone, every single person, to meet him in the bread and the faux wine, to make this banquet as much like the one he attended as we can make it.

There are no places of honor. There is no person more distinguished than any other. And the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are welcome.

Because one night over dinner, Jesus told us that was the way to do it.

Amen.

