

Sunday, September 1, 2019
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17 (Year C)
Luke 14.1, 7-14
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Luke's Gospel contains more references to eating, banquets, and being "at table" than any other Gospel. The table is a principal site for fellowship and discourse for the Lukan Jesus. The dining table seems to be one of Jesus' preferred locations for teaching, encountering the marginalized, and even reprimanding. Today's Gospel account incorporates nearly every aspect of what Jesus does at table. In this one lesson, he teaches, he reprimands—twice—and, at least figuratively through his second reprimand, illustrates what it means to engage those who are marginalized. Or to be more precise, he challenges his host and all present to engage with the marginalized.

We start with Jesus being at a Sabbath dinner hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. We are told that those present were watching Jesus closely. After all, he was well-known for doing the unexpected. And from their perspective, even the illegal, such as healing on the Sabbath. In fact, in the five verses omitted from today's reading, verses two through six, Jesus does first pose the question as to whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, then proceeds to heal a man with dropsy (what we now refer to as edema).

While the host and guests are busy watching Jesus to see what else he might do, Jesus is also watching them, to see how they interact and behave in general. "When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable" (Lk 14.7). Before we get to the parable—to the teaching and the first reprimand—it helps to know something of Palestinian etiquette regarding banquets. Back in those days, there was no Emily Post or Miss Manners to dictate seating arrangements at such events. There were no place cards to indicate where guests were to sit at the banquet table. But there were rules. The guests—male guests—would recline on couches placed around the dining table, with the center couch being the place of honor. The inhabitants of that place of honor were chosen according to wealth, power, or status. The other guests would then seat themselves according to their own relative status, with the more distinguished sitting closer to the seat of honor. The lower one's status, the farther away they were to be seated from the seat of honor.

What Jesus observed was that the guests tended to think higher of themselves than their actual station allowed, in an attempt to be seated closer to the seats of honor. Presumably, one, to appear to be more important than they might really be, and two, to be able to rub elbows with those of higher status. Networking 101. Of course, there was a downside to this arrangement. The host had ultimate say in where people sat. It was his prerogative to move guests around according to actual status, or according to his perception of their status. And once the banquet began, there was still the possibility that guests could be moved. So, if someone of higher status showed up (fashionably) late, the host would move someone to a lower position to make room for the "superior" guest. Think of the humiliation that would cause the one who was moved. Moving him would send the message that he was not as important as others. Or as important as he thought himself to be. So, Jesus suggests that it would actually be better for a man

to initially sit at a place of lower status. That way, he won't likely be moved to make way for someone of greater status. And maybe, just maybe, the host will notice that he is sitting in a place of lower status than he deserves and will move him to a place of higher honor. Now wouldn't that be great! Everyone would see that the host thinks the guest is even more important. Talk about an ego boost.

Jesus summarizes his teaching [slash] reprimand with "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk 14.11). Jesus seeks to discourage the presumption of privilege and encourages taking a humbler posture. Now, to be sure, exhortations regarding the need for humility can be dangerous. Those who are genuinely and sufficiently humble don't realize they are as such, so beat themselves up because they are not humble enough. On the other hand, those who could really stand to listen to such exhortations, who could use a healthy dose of humility, generally believe that such exhortations do not apply to them. That humility is a sign of weakness, or worse yet, believe that they are humble, so don't need to listen. Of course, there are those who take such exhortations to heart and do seek to become more humble. And then there are those who view such exhortations as a challenge and strive to become the most humble person possible—effectively taking pride in their humility. All of these undoubtedly came into play with the guests at the dinner Jesus attended.

The key point that Jesus is trying to make is that the presumption of priority and privilege does not make it so. God has criteria other than wealth, power, or social standing to determine who is "worthy" of positions of honor in the Kingdom of God. Although, I am hesitant to use the term "worthy" as it implies some sort of merit-based system. That we have to rack up a certain number of points in order to gain access to the Kingdom of God, or to occupy certain levels or places of honor. Which, at least as I understand it, is not how God works. None of us are truly worthy. We all do good things in our lives. But we also fall short in some areas. But we are all included by God's grace. But Jesus is working with the prevailing cultural understanding to make his point. What Jesus is getting at is that from God's point of view, God's knowledge of our true character matters more than our own self-perceptions, be they spot-on, misguided, or somewhere in between.

Jesus places this in terms of humility. But we need to be clear as to what Jesus means when he talks about humbling oneself. To humble oneself does not mean cultivating low self-esteem or allowing oneself to be a doormat. To humble oneself means remembering that we are God's creation. As such, we are to live according to heavenly values and heavenly priorities. Which leads Jesus to issue a second reprimand to try to drive the point home as to what it means to be humble. What it means to live according to heavenly priorities. He tells the host and his guests that when they have a lunch or dinner, they should not invite those who will be inclined and able to reciprocate. Instead, they should "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." He goes on to justify this by saying "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Lk 14.13-14).

Of course, as with much of what Jesus said, this second reprimand is not just about who we invite to dinner. It's about a broader attitude, a more expansive approach, to our interactions with others. To not just be concerned about "our own," but to also be concerned about those

who we might otherwise ignore precisely because they are not part of our usual circles, because they are not “like us,” because they are other. What Jesus is really talking about is turning our attention to those who are hurting, those who are struggling, those who are vulnerable, those who are marginalized.

As baptized Christians, we are called to conform to Christ and to his ways. In the vows we take when we are baptized, which we renew on every baptismal feast day whether or not anyone is actually baptized, we promise to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” That we will seek to live our lives in such a way that our words and our actions proclaim the Good News of God’s love and mercy. We vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our [ourselves].” All persons, not just those who are like us. We vow to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” The dignity of every human being, not just those of equal or greater status.

As baptized Christians, we continually strive to live into our baptismal vows, into the baptized life. To be continually mindful of who we are and whose we are. And to be continually mindful of just what that means. How do we authentically live (or live into) the Gospel? As Jesus implies in his reprimands of the host and guests of the dinner party he attends, it is not about seeking to receive blessings from God so as to receive greater status. Rather, it is about being a blessing to others. To be a blessing to those who are of particular concern to God. The poor, the widowed and orphaned, the crippled, the lame, the blind—to use the common biblical categories. Or, in our own time, those who are marginalized in any way. Be it based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or immigration status. Just to name the major forms of marginalization.

It’s about performing acts of love and mercy, just as God shows us his love and mercy. Not as a means of gaining favor with God, but as a way of showing our gratitude for what God has done for us; gratitude for the love and mercy that God has shown us. It’s about being the hands and feet and heart of God to a broken and hurting world. Being a sacramental sign, performing sacramental acts, of God’s love and mercy and grace.

Jesus says, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus’ own life and ministry are the very model of humility that ultimately leads to exaltation. Even though fully divine, he did not choose self-exaltation. Rather, he humbled himself by taking the form of a human. He humbled himself in his ministry and service to others. And he further humbled himself by dying on a cross. In response God exalted him, raising him on the third day. And it is through that exaltation that he confers the greatest blessing upon all of us—the promise of eternal life.

We are called to follow his example. That through our humility, through our obedience to him, we are called to serve, that we, too, might become a blessing to others. And he promises that in being a blessing to others, we ourselves are blessed.