

Sunday, August 28, 2022
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17 (Year C)

Luke 14.1, 7-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1105867810358931>

(Sermon begins at about 18:25)

“Status”

What would Miss Manners or Emily Post say? Probably that the whole situation could have been avoided if the host had simply used place cards. Of course, 2,000 years ago, place cards at dinner parties were not a thing.

Jesus is at a dinner party hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. Which, in some ways, seems strange in and of itself. After all, the Pharisees spend a lot of time criticizing Jesus and his message. And Jesus spends a lot of time condemning the actions of the Pharisees and the temple authorities. And yet, this particular leader of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner. And yet, Jesus accepted.

Scripture is clear that, as Jesus gained popularity among the masses, the Pharisees and the temple authorities were becoming increasingly concerned for their status in the eyes of the people. They were increasingly concerned about what Jesus was up to. And they were increasingly concerned with finding sufficient evidence to take Jesus down. So they were always watching. Always listening. Always waiting. As the old saying goes, “keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” And what better way to do that than at a social function. A place where, when plied with good food and good wine, Jesus was liable to let his guard down and say or do something that might provide some of that evidence they are seeking. Which did happen at the dinner party in question. In the few verses omitted from today’s Gospel reading, Jesus starts off healing a man with “dropsy”—with edema. On a Sabbath, no less. So now, what other dirt might the Pharisees get on Jesus?

What ensues does not so much provide any dirt on Jesus, but rather gives Jesus the opportunity to examine prevailing social norms of the day and use them as a forum to illustrate what he is really about. To illustrate what God’s kingdom is really about. Jesus does this by issuing commentary on the conventional dinner seating practices of his day. Just like in our own time, position of seating can and often does indicate one’s status, at least in the eyes of or in relation to the host of the event. In our own time and culture, many events have a head table, or if only one table, a head of the table. Regardless of the number of tables involved, the concept is the same. The guests of honor are seated next or close to the host. The closer one is seated to the host, the greater the perceived status or importance. At more formal functions with a large number of guests, the seating arrangement is painstakingly planned, with the results indicated by place cards to make it easy for all invited to find their seat. And, if you want to read between the lines, to know where you stand. (Or rather, sit.)

So, too, in ancient times. Where one sat indicated their status or importance in the eyes of the host. But, they did not have place cards to guide them to their spot. People sat themselves, selecting a seat based on their own personal estimation of their status with the host. And you can see where that could lead. This approach could make for some potentially embarrassing situations. What Jesus observes is that some people naturally think they are more important, take a seat closer to the host and seat of honor, and then run the risk of being bumped to a less-distinguished position to make room for someone deemed of higher status. Awkward!

Jesus suggests that instead, one should initially take a seat of lower honor. In hopes of being moved to a seat of greater honor at the invitation of the host, thereby calling attention to all present that they are more worthy and of greater status. Of course, what gets lost in the story is that even this suggestion is probably made by Jesus as a back-handed criticism. Over time, picking one's seat at a dinner party developed, in some instances, into a farce. A way of gaming the system. People would purposefully sit in seats of extremely low status—the “cheap seats”—in an attempt, in fervent hopes, of being exalted and moved to a seat of higher status. As a means of gaining public recognition for just how important they REALLY are. “Because, after all, I'm the most humble person you will ever meet. I defy you to find anybody more humble than I am!” So Jesus is, in a backhanded way, exposing the whole notion of “honor-maneuvering” as a farce. As cause for shame.

He does the same with his commentary on the practice of having a party and inviting all sorts of wealthy and powerful people, with the expectation of then receiving all sorts of invitations to events hosted by your guests. Because that's what you do. After being invited to a nice dinner, you reciprocate and invite your host to an equally lavish affair as an expression of gratitude. Again, something that effectively became a game, a farce, a way of manipulating relationships to one's advantage. If nothing else, to at least get a few good meals.

Jesus suggests that instead, “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.” This statement is Jesus' commentary and corrective to the prevailing attitude—in Jesus' time and in ours—about the importance of social status and the structures that maintain and perpetuate such concepts and attitudes. When looked at through the lens of God's kingdom, Jesus is effectively saying that there is a fundamental problem with our structures and hierarchies, which focus on elevating and exalting, on claiming greater and higher positions of status. And few are more guilty of this than the institutional church. We love our hierarchies and structures. And while we may talk about the priesthood of all believers in which all are equal regardless of order, there is also the danger, if we are not careful, of this devolving into a variation of the very practices of honor-maneuvering that Jesus condemns in today's Gospel.

In God's economy, status is not based on wealth or power. I take that back. Actually it is. Only status is not based on one's own wealth and power or perception thereof, but rather is based on the wealth and power of those whom one associates with. Not because they have wealth and power, but precisely because they don't. That it is in associating with the “least of these” that we recognize our own calling to servant ministry; that we recognize the inherent worth of

all; and in so doing, seek to help others to claim their own status and dignity. Although what that looks like is not based on the same metrics as in conventional society.

In God's economy, status is not based on who you know and who you rub elbows with. I take that back. Actually, it is. Only, it is based on knowing Jesus. On knowing and following his commandments. It is based on rubbing elbows with those who are most in need of hearing the Good News proclaimed, in word and action. It is based on finding ways to help the "least of these" come to know and rub elbows with Jesus and to know his love. A love that can only be shown through our actions.

One of my current favorite sources of Biblical commentary refers to what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel as a "table-turning revolution." They go on to provide a poignant summation of how we, in our own day, are to view and respond to Jesus' scathing commentary in today's Gospel:

And how can we take part today in this table-turning revolution? Neither by seeking out the "places of honor" in order to be exalted now, nor by sitting at the "lowest place" in order to be exalted later. Jesus mischievously bars both of these doors, and so sends us out on a different kind of mission with a different kind of spring in our step, a journey in which "being exalted" isn't the goal at all. The goal, in a word, is love. But not just any love. Jesus envisions a love freed from all crass attempts at exaltation, at scoring points, at earning righteousness. A love for its own sake, without ulterior motive, without scheme or advantage, without *quid pro quo*. A truly generous love, a love that does not seek to be "repaid" (Luke 14:14). For that kind of love—free from all need for compensation, never mind exaltation—is the love God exalts!¹

At its heart, what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel is saying that in God's economy, social status is ultimately meaningless. Not to diminish individual accomplishments. It is certainly laudable that people are driven to try to improve themselves and their lives. To improve the world around them. We certainly need that. But for that to be the basis of one's identity is what is, in the long run, meaningless. In God's economy, it does not matter whether one is the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation or is unemployed. It does not matter whether one lives in a multi-million dollar mansion or is homeless. In God's economy, the only thing that gives us status is our relationship to God and to Jesus Christ. In that, we all carry the same status. We are all children of God. As such, we all have the same rights and benefits. No one is higher and more exalted. No one is lower or less esteemed. That will be made evident when our lives on this earth are through and we take our place at God's heavenly banquet table, where we will find that there are no place cards. Because we will all be guests of honor. We will all be exalted for who we are: God's beloved children. If we could just find a way to live into that here and now.

¹ "Turning Tables: SALT's Commentary for Twelfth Week after Pentecost," SALT, August 22, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-twelfth-week-after-pentecost>.