

Sunday, August 31, 2025
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17C)
Luke 14.1, 7-14
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Humility and Hospitality”

I’m sure Emily Post is rolling in her grave. “What do you mean people are just sitting wherever they want at a wedding reception? That’s madness! Utter chaos! That’s why you use place cards. Tastefully done with hand calligraphy, of course.” And by the way, it should come as no surprise that Emily Post was an Episcopalian. Everything in proper order, just as God intended.

Yes, Emily Post, Miss Manners, and all the self-proclaimed experts on proper social etiquette would have a field day with the scene we witness in today’s Gospel. Jesus is attending a wedding banquet hosted by a leader of the local Pharisees. While everything is ready for the banquet, there are no place cards nor publicly displayed seating charts to indicate where guests are to sit. That is not to say there is not a seating plan at such events. The problem was, that schema was pretty subjective. This was an “honor and shame” culture—in which identity and social standing are tied to the family and community; where one’s actions are perceived as bringing honor or shame not only upon themselves but also upon their entire group, be it family or community. In such cultures, one’s social standing was incredibly important. And in many situations, including social situations, one’s standing dictated such things as where one sat at banquets. There was enough subjectivity involved in the identification of standing and honor that, at times, there could be conflicting perceptions among attendees. And certainly, in a situation such as a banquet, it was understood that the host had the ultimate say in who he viewed as having greater honor in his own home. Or at least, in that particular situation. Those of higher honor were seated closer to the host and the head table. Really, not unlike in many of our own banquet situations. But at least we generally have place cards to guide us.

All that said, guests were left to discern for themselves where they should sit. Meaning that they had to try to read the room and determine where they stood relative to other attendees on the arbitrary and subjective honor scale. And human nature shows time and again that—particularly those with wealth and power—generally have a more inflated perception of their status compared to their peers. Face it, we tend to downplay or minimize our less flattering qualities and perhaps overemphasize the positive in the calculus. The result, which is what Jesus observes at this banquet, is a jockeying for position. Resulting in some sitting at places of higher honor than that bestowed by the host. Which then can turn into an embarrassing situation in which the host informs a guest that they are not as honored as they think and need to move to a position of lesser prestige. Perceived as shame in the whole “honor and shame” system. Not to mention a blow to the ego.

The Pharisees present know that Jesus will use this as some sort of lesson. He always does. As we are told at the beginning of the reading, they are intently watching Jesus. Waiting to see what he is going to do or say this time. Hoping for something that they might be able to use against him. And Jesus, at this point, has nothing to lose. He has already informed his disciples two times that he will be betrayed, suffer, and be killed. He is already making his way toward

Jerusalem, knowing what will happen there. So, no use pulling any punches. Might as well go out with a bang.

That being the case, Jesus has no problem calling out the situation he observes at the wedding banquet. Calling out those who think higher of themselves than probably warranted. “You know, rather than embarrass yourself by taking the wrong seat and then having to move to a lower position, just exercise a little humility and take a lower position to begin with. Then, you will receive even greater honor when the host moves you to a higher position.” What a novel concept. To exercise a little humility for a change. What does Jesus continually say? “The last shall be first and the first shall be last?”

Now wait just one minute, Jesus! That is crazy talk! Because you know what will happen. We are dealing with a room filled with the movers and shakers of local society. The party is hosted by the leader of the local Pharisees. You know that the guests are primarily going to be the local elite, the wealthy and powerful. There is a lot of ego in that room. Yes, Jesus is trying to teach them about the importance of humility. A group that probably needs it more than any. Do you honestly think they are going to actually get it? Do you think that encouraging them to strategically sit at a lower place will really be done as a genuine act of humility? Of course not! If anything, they will see this is a great way of being further exalted. They might change to jockeying for the lowest position on the pretext of being humble. “See, I’m more humble than all those others.” All a ruse so that the host will ultimately move them to a place of higher honor. This would be a great public demonstration of just how important they really are. What an honor that would be! Ego one, humility zero.

I would venture that Jesus suggested what he did as a way of toying with the guests. Knowing full well what would happen. Offering a teaching he knew would expose their hypocrisy. To truly demonstrate their lack of humility. Further emphasizing the power of humility. And, in so doing, shining light on the fact that the whole system of honor and the self-aggrandizement it promotes and elicits is actually shameful. Exposing the hypocrisy of the system and those who adhere to it.

Jesus then goes for the jugular with another suggestion. Instead of inviting all your wealthy and powerful friends to lunch or dinner parties—which carried a societal expectation that they would then invite you in return—instead, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Invite those on the margins of society. The one’s you would just as soon not have anything to do with. By specifically inviting the poor and the marginalized, that would, by default, make them the honored guests at the lunch or dinner. Placing them in the “higher places of honor.” Relegating the remaining guests—presumably one’s wealthy and powerful friends—to lower positions. Putting them in their true and deserved place. I’m sure that went over like a lead balloon. Suggesting that the ambitious status-seekers take the lowest place in favor of the poor and marginalized. Suggesting that the top one percent actually humble themselves and take the place of those they have stepped on to get where they are. To actually provide hospitality for such as these. Unthinkable! And yet . . .

In his casual observations and suggestions, Jesus has mischievously turned the whole honor and shame system in play at that banquet upside down. Calling out the hypocrisy of the wealthy

and the powerful of the day—of any day really, including our own—and challenging them to take some upside down action. To not seek after their own honor and to lift themselves up at the expense of others, but to seek to honor and uplift those who are otherwise incapable of doing so. At least, incapable of doing so under the current system. Rather, to uplift those who have been denied the opportunities to do so. Precisely because of the corrupt and unjust systems that exist to further the top one percent at the expense of the 99 percent. Jesus is challenging those who have the means and resources to make a difference in people's lives to actually do so—to make a difference in other people's lives and not their own. To actually live the Gospel they profess to believe in and actually care for those of greatest concern to God: the poor, the sick, and the marginalized. This is genuine humility. This is genuine hospitality.

In God's kingdom, the goal is not to exalt oneself. The goal is to humble oneself. And the goal is not to use humility as a means to later exaltation. The goal is not be exalted at all. The goal is to work to exalt others. Especially those who are on the margins. Especially those who have been denied opportunities of being exalted. This is done by embodying and putting into action the love that God has for all of us. To make that love tangible. The love that we each experience in our own lives. The love that was ultimately demonstrated through the cross and the resurrection. The ultimate act of humility performed by our God and by our Savior.

We seek to humbly demonstrate what Jesus teaches in tangible ways through our own parish ministries of hospitality. Through our Parish Life and Hospitality Committees, which provide food and hospitality for members and visitors alike: our Sunday coffee hours, regularly scheduled events like Music at Four, specials like the annual Parish Picnic and the annual Christmas Dinner, as well as receptions for funerals. Through our Food Bank which, thanks to the generosity of our parishioners in making monetary donations as well as donating food items, we are able to provide bags of groceries to about 75 families each month—helping several hundred people who otherwise might not have enough food. Through Feed My Lambs, where on the first Saturday of the month we provide meals for 100 to 120 of our unhoused siblings who come to the St. Luke's Shower Program—again, providing a weekend meal where there otherwise might not be one. And through our various outreach projects throughout the year where we are able to collect gift cards, feminine hygiene products, school supplies, shoes, pet supplies, and more for those who would not otherwise have such basic needs. All tangible, sacramental ways we are able to humbly serve those in need of a helping hand, thereby showing the hospitality of God's love.

And in a broader, sacramental way, we demonstrate the centrality of God's love every week in our celebration of Holy Eucharist. Our celebration of God's humility, a celebration of God's hospitality, through the heavenly banquet. Where God models for us true humility and true hospitality. The banquet to which God invites all, regardless of status, regardless of honor, regardless of shame. The heavenly meal at which all are given a seat of honor.