

Back Row Seats Available Luke 14:1, 7-14

In ancient times there was a song sung that seems to be a perfect supplement to today's scripture. "Oh Lord, It's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror, Cause I get better lookin' each day. To know me is to love me I must be a heck of a man. Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble But I'm doin' the best that I can!...." This song from Mac Davis published way back in 1980, comes from a time when narcissism (thinking you are the center of the universe and perfect in every way) was known to be absurd. The song is what sarcasm really is.... saying something you know... and everyone else knows is absolutely untrue.

Today's lectionary, scheduled in rotation years and years ago seems to be coming in just the nick of time. It is a corrective in this time when we are hearing narcissism is the "way to be successful in business" and apparently in life itself. Jesus is always amazing in his ability to be fully present to the moment, and also see and analyze the human dynamics of the moment. At a dinner party probably in his honor, he observes people are trying to get the good seats, presumably near him. I think it is hard for us to fully understand this because we are not so rigid in our hierarchy in our day to day life. In Jesus' time, there is a very specific order of who sits at the table, who sits in a second row around the table and who is seated on the window ledges or even outside. And so taking an honored "place at the table" is a declaration that you are important - part of a little power dance we humans do called jockeying for position. Getting a seat of honor builds your reputation and social capital, and so we fight to go higher and higher.

Why is Jesus critical of this human habit? Oh, we know humility is an important Christian value, but why? First, humility allows us to remember who we are. Thomas Merton writes "Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real." You see, when we are jockeying for position, we have to hide our frailties, our weaknesses and assert we are better than the one next to us fighting for the same spot. This is a great danger in our culture, because if we hold onto that false pride filled self long enough.. if we never reflect on our own humanness with its beauty and glory and its falterings and vulnerabilities, we will begin to believe our own press

and lose touch with ourselves. The secret to us becoming our authentic self is to be honest with ourselves.

Self aggrandizing not only can keep us from our authentic selves, but it also separates us from God. One of the readings we did not hear today from Sirach says “The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.” When we deceive ourselves and live in the false belief that we are really self-sufficient or my favorite American mythic phrase, self made, then we think we have no need of God. Such a separation leaves us left only to our own resources, a very lonely and difficult pathway in life.

A second reason to follow Jesus suggestion of starting at the low seat at the table is it enables us to get a more accurate perspective on life and humanity. It is like the old native wisdom encouraging us To walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. It lets us see what life looks like from a different place in life. And things look very different, and have a different level of importance depending on where you sit. When you have the back row seat at a concert, the sound quality is much more important than the subtleties of facial expression on the musicians. Our needs and our wants and our hopes are all rooted in our starting place.

It has always amazed me, by the way, how different places have different valuable seats. In church and in school (all levels) people find the back 1/2 of the seating to be much better than the front half and the front rows are very bad. And yet, people will pay 1000’s of dollars to set in the front row at a concert of their favorite band. Curious Anyway...Where you sit whether at a concert, at church, or in the metaphorical table of society.. where you sit determines a great deal about your experience of life. As a person of privilege - a white, straight, educated professional, I have always had a seat at the table. And if I don’t try to see things from others perspectives, I will not understand them, and ironically, I will also not understand me, and how my life and successes are enhanced and even allowed by my place at the table.

When we are freed from striving for position, we can know our true selves, we can allow ourselves to walk in others shoes; allowing us to be open to others, not only with compassion, but also to celebrate them and who they are. Bishop Desmond Tutu got at this as he explained the African word, ubuntu "A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of

others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”

Jesus boils his message down to “don’t strive to be honored” and in fact, honor those who are not honored by anyone else, the poor, the oppressed and those who cannot pay you back or build up your reputation. Mother Theresa’s final party, her funeral did just that. CNN reported, “Dignitaries from more than 23 countries were on hand for the Mass. But at the insistence of her religious order, the Missionaries of Charity, about half of the seats in the stadium were reserved for those unfortunate people Mother Teresa served during her life, who referred to her affectionately, and simply, as “Mother.” In that spirit, wine for the Eucharist was brought into the hall by a leprosy patient; water by a woman released from prison; bread by a man living with a disability.

We can be free from the striving for position and power, if we will give into honest humility and love. It is risky, being authentic is hard. And knowing that the homeless man, or the woman convicted of robbery, or the big corporate embezzler all are frail humans like us means we cannot just dismiss them or ignore their situation. How many of you feel at some time in your life you have as the scripture says, “entertained angels unaware?” I too have had that privilege, but there is always more I can do along those lines. And to make sure, perhaps it is time to spend some time in the back row and see life from a different perspective. I am sure what seems important may suddenly look a little different. Maybe it is time to listen to Jesus and throw a party where we invite those who really need one - the poor, the outcast, the strangers, because in truth we need them, perhaps more, than they need us. AMEN

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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.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When 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; and 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. But 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

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. 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."