

Year C Proper 17
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today we hear Jesus turn things upside down again, as he attends a dinner party in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. He teaches them, and us, about hospitality, and humility. Remember, the Pharisees are the members of the Jewish community who observe the traditional laws very strictly, and so they were often in conflict with Jesus. Actually Jesus often calls them hypocrites, because he says the Pharisees are more worried about the details of the law, and the way things appear, than in actually practicing justice and mercy. But the Pharisees had become extremely influential by the time Jesus was born, and so being at a banquet held by the leader of the Pharisees would have meant associating with some of the most prestigious people in the community.

As the party takes shape, it seems like Jesus is *watching* the Pharisees and their guests, and the Pharisees are certainly watching him. No doubt they're hoping he'll make a misstep, or say something outrageous. But Jesus notices that the guests are all eager to sit in the most prestigious seats, and it seems like they're all jockeying for the *best* one. That seat would be the one nearest to the host. Those who sat farthest away from the host were the least important in that particular group. We don't do this sort of thing explicitly in most of our parties, so it might seem odd to rank people this way, but this was their practice. Jesus also observes that his host has invited only the other socially elite members of the community. And we might think, well, yes. We understand that practice a little better. Why wouldn't one of the leaders of the community invite people of similar status and influence? That is the way it is usually done, even today.

So in watching these influential people maneuvering for the best seats at the table, Jesus tells a parable of a wedding banquet that mirrors exactly what he is witnessing. He tells them that, rather than snag the seat of honor when you first enter, and then be humiliated if a higher status guest arrives, it is wiser to sit in the lowest place and wait for the host's invitation to "move up higher." He then goes on to say, "For all who exalt

themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

As Irene Maliaman says, Jesus is not just teaching about table manners and practical advice on avoiding social embarrassment here. He is also not saying that we should *not* sit in premium seats. He’s trying to teach humility. Because, while self-promotion is the accepted way to get ahead in the world, humility is the way to please God. So Jesus is encouraging us not only to behave in a way that is humble—by taking the lower seat—but to realize that we really are *not* better than another person. Even if *society* tells us that we are better, in God’s eyes, we are *all equal*.

Jesus then tells his host that when he gives a banquet, he should not invite those who can return the favor: “your friends, your brothers, or your relatives or rich neighbors.” Instead, the Pharisee should “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” We can imagine that Jesus’s host was annoyed to hear this advice; he might even have been horrified at the idea of associating with such marginalized, unclean people.

But we all need admiration and attention, and in our culture today it seems that social media makes that need even greater. For instance, we can post on Facebook or Twitter about every single thing we do—a meal we eat, a place we visit, and get almost immediate feedback. And you might know that getting thumbs up, or likes, or hearts on a post actually give us a tiny zing of dopamine, that “feel good” hormone, which then reinforces the behavior of posting on social media. And if we post a selfie with a celebrity, or an influential person, it’s likely to get a lot of attention. But how about if we post a selfie with somebody unknown—or just a picture of somebody unknown, never mind a selfie. That unknown person is not going to get much attention, are they? So we won’t get many thumbs up, or hearts, or shares or whatever for that post. This is one of our culture’s equivalents of what Jesus is talking about. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t share pictures of your dog, or your grandchildren, or a gorgeous sunset. The point is to think about why we’re doing what we’re doing. Is it to, as Jesus says, “exalt” ourselves—to make ourselves seem more important? If that’s the reason, then we shouldn’t do it.

We also do have the dinner parties, don’t we? And do we “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”? I know I don’t. I invite my

family, my friends, my colleagues, and people that I've met through my family, my friends and my colleagues. I'm not sure how I would even go about doing what Jesus says we should do. How would that invitation be received? Would the people Jesus recommends even come to my party? I've never tried.

Jesus's point here, really, is humility. It's about whether we think we're better than other people. Do we see the face of Christ in everyone, or are we even looking? The other day I was driving to the bank, and I finally pulled over to talk to a man who has waved to me many times as I've driven by his house. His name is Altire, and he often sits under a red umbrella just down the road from the post office. You might know him. He talked to me about how some people wave as they go by, but very few people actually stop to talk with him. He then quizzed me on the Bible, which he has memorized a lot of. And he invited me to his church, as I invited him here. It was a reminder of how much we **all** have in common, first because we are all God's creatures, and for Altire and for me, because we are siblings in Christ.

So—humility. There is a joke among my Mennonite friends that they compete to see who can be the most humble. But if we **can** be humble before one another, that is what Jesus is watching for, and that is what he wants to see. Amen.

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