

Guests, Hosts, and Pecking Orders

Being a Humble Guest and an Inclusive Host

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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One of the most intriguing and exciting elements of preparing a sermon each week is exploring the rich depth of information flowing out from new biblical scholarship. It's fascinating for me to learn, and then share with you, how, for instance, an often-overlooked word or phrase can turn the traditional biblical interpretation of a story on its head, leading to entirely new revelations.

Well, that's simply *not* the case when it comes to interpreting this morning's Gospel Reading from Luke 14. While there is always some new nuance to explore, this passage it's actually quite easy to comprehend in understanding what Jesus has to say about being a humble guest, and about being an inclusive host.

One reason for the simplicity is that what Jesus describes at the dinner party he attended can just as easily be observed today. I would suspect that we have all witnessed, if not participated in, what Jesus describes: certain guests jockeying to sit in the place of highest honor next to the host, or what we often refer to as 'the best seat in the house.' When this happens, it's interesting to recognize just where others, or yourself for that matter, appear to fall in the 'pecking order,' that colloquial term for a **hierarchical system of social organization**.

This hierarchical model has been known to humans since tribal days. And it continues to be the principal model in the business world and in the military. Business types sometimes even say, 'She [or he] is next in the pecking order.'

Without intending to be judgmental, what is your experience in playing this game? For yes, it's a game that everyone plays to some extent at one time or another. It is deeply engrained into our own culture and society – perhaps even into our very DNA of being human. It's kind of a survival of the fittest. Perhaps there was even a defined pecking order in your family when you were growing up, particularly if you had brothers and/or sisters. I was always reminded by my older brother where I stood. And yes, I say that as a bitter middle child. What about the pecking order of when you were in school? The athletes and cheerleaders were always higher up than those of us who sang in the choir. What about where you work, or in the other organizations of which you are a member? It can even be recognized in many assisted living centers, especially in the dining hall, taking on much of the same attitude and behavior as a school lunchroom.

Do I dare ask if there's is a pecking order here at College Hill? I've always considered the role of a pastor as a great equalizer, with a goal – admittedly, not always reached – of not playing favorites or showing partiality, because ultimately no one is more important as a human being than anyone else. All are equal in the eyes of God.

Today's Gospel Reading gives Jesus' timeless perspective on this phenomenon we know as "climbing the social ladder." Upon observing the behavior of guests at a dinner party scurrying to sit at the place of highest honor, Jesus tells a parable of a wedding banquet and advises choosing the lowest place, far removed from the head table. By doing so, one avoids public embarrassment if asked by the host to move and sit in another seat. On the other hand, if one takes a lower seat, on occasion may even be called up to a higher place of honor near the head table. This has actually happened to me at a wedding banquet when I was asked to move up to the where the wedding party sat. Yet, I realized it had everything to do with my role as a pastor.

Ancient customs in Jesus' day were dictated by a system of honor and shame.

While each culture in history, including our own, defines for itself what brings honor and what leads to shame, it's helpful to remember that honor is not gained by seizing prominence for oneself. Rather, **honor must be conferred upon and given by others.**

Now, in and of itself, all this is of no particular *religious* significance, but rather is just sound practical advice on good social behavior. Luke, however, writes that since Jesus spoke these instructions as a parable, it meant that Jesus is not simply discussing proper social etiquette. Instead, Jesus reveals the appropriate behavior of those of us who call ourselves disciples and followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. What Jesus has in mind is an explanation of his favorite topic: **how things are to be ordered within the realm/kingdom/kin-dom/household of God. You can choose which of those is your preferred metaphor.** Basically: **what would life be like if we lived by God's rule of loving God and loving one another?** This is made explicit in the closing statement, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This pronouncement, with its theme of reversals of fortune, occurs frequently in the gospels, and especially in Luke.

Here, then, is a biblical principle and warning that applies to each of us: **we must not fall into the prideful trap of trying to manipulate, intimidate, bully, compromise, or peck our way to the top.** Jesus is not condemning those who are at the top rung of the ladder, but rather offers a critique and warning of how one gets there. For let us all remember that our worth as human beings is not ultimately measured by the recognition and honor we get from others, but rather by the certainty – the faith – that God loves us and accepts us. God loves you and accepts you.

After these instructive observations concerning the rules of behavior in the realm or kin-dom of God about being a humble dinner guest, Jesus turns to give a lesson about being an inclusive dinner host. If you've ever hosted a dinner party, you know that it carries with it many pleasant and positive connotations and benefits, such as the opportunity to share hospitality, generosity, graciousness, kindness, and concern for the comfort of others. Jesus observes, however, that on occasion **hosting can turn into an act by which one person actually tries to gain power over others and put them in his or her debt.** It's the old "gift with strings attached" technique, and **it's the worst kind of hospitality, for its motivation takes on a very self-serving purpose.** Again, Jesus is not giving lessons on social graces and proper etiquette. The point is that hosting can be a way of making others feel they are in your debt, so that they will in turn *reciprocate* when preparing their guest list. This scripture passage reveals that **a host who expects a return on his or her invitation will tend to not offer service, food, help, or hospitality to those who cannot repay them, and so guest lists consist only of persons who are able to return the favor.**

Historically, gratitude became a form of reciprocity and indebtedness, where one has a duty and obligation to do something in return for the person who does something for you. It's a system of benefactor and beneficiary. In legal terms, that is called quid pro quo. We fall into this in common ways ourselves. **Diana Butler Bass**, this year's speaker at our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series on October 20, discusses this in length in her latest book, *Grateful*, which our Book Study Group will start look at this month.

So then, **let us look at our own motivations for giving or offering favors and gifts to others.** Therefore, verses 12-14 state: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers [or sisters] or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they 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.**" Jesus is not telling us that we cannot ever have dinner with our friends. Rather, he is calling for behavior that lives out this conviction about being a part of the household of God.

We are called to invite to the table – into our fellowship – those who have little or no status in society. By application, this has a lot to say about whom we invite and extend genuine hospitality to here at the church. For example, **may it never be the case that we are more inviting and hospitable to those who seem to have a higher social standing than to those who do not.** It is Jesus, then, who models how to be an inclusive host, and reminds us that everyone is invited to the table. Luke certainly meant to extend this teaching to the invitation of the Lord's Supper, where Christ is the host.

So, I'll leave you with this question to reflect upon this week: How can you and I, how can we as a community of faith, **live by these rules of God's realm in ways that use the power, position, and yes, the privilege we have in life with humility, and in ways that invite the poor, the outcast, the forgotten, and the uninvited to the table, and into our fellowship?** Perhaps, for instance, we can keep this in mind when choosing who to sit by during one of our Potluck Luncheons.

And in the process of being humble guests and inclusive hosts, let us try very hard – at least in this community of faith – to **leave the pecking order to the chickens.**

Amen.

Resources:
New Interpreter's Bible
Preaching Through the Christian Year
Interpretation: Luke