

Set Aside the Pecking Order

Being a Humble Guest and an Inclusive Host

Luke 14: 1, 7-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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August 28, 2022

Unlike a great many stories found in the Bible, like those that take a lot of work to understand in the context in which they were written, today's Gospel Reading from Luke 14 isn't one of them. It's not hard to grasp what Jesus has to say about being a humble guest, and about being an inclusive host. One reason for the easy comprehension is that what Jesus describes happening at the dinner party he attends can just as easily be observed today.

I 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.' (Or, like those two disciples who argue over who would sit at Jesus' right hand in his glory.) 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 the earliest tribal days. And it continues to be the principal model in the business world and in the military. When it comes to a promotion, for example, business types sometimes even say, 'She [or he] is next in the pecking order.'

Without intending to be judgmental, or at least not condemning, 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 the 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 siblings. I was always reminded by my older brother where I stood. (And yes, I say that as a bitter middle child ☺) Dad had "his" comfy chair in the family room that no one dared sit in when he came home and wanted to watch TV.

What about the pecking order of when you were in **school**? For me, it always seemed like the athletes and cheerleaders and those from wealthy families were higher up in social status than those of us who sang in the choir, or played in the band, or were on the debate team, or in the chess club? What about where you **work**, or use to work, or in the other organizations of which you are or were a member? **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 that of an 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. For all are equal in the eyes of Divine.**

Today's Gospel Reading gives Jesus' timeless perspective on this pecking order phenomenon. 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. For if one takes a lower seat, on occasion may be called up to a higher place of honor near the head table. But the motivation to sit at a lower seat should be one born of humility, not a prideful strategy hoping to be asked to sit at a higher seat. And when we look at all of creation, who put us on top anyway? We did.

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 kin-dom of God.** The kin-dom of God can be summarized, in part, as **what society and life and relationships would be like if we lived by God's rule of loving God and loving one another – all others – and loving oneself.** 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 most often 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. Saying that, Jesus is *not* condemning those who are at the top rung of the social 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** – always!

After these instructive observations concerning the rules of behavior in the 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 and well-being 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 become a way of making others feel they are in your debt, so that they will, in turn, reciprocate when they prepare 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, or at least willing, to return the favor, of which there is an expectation that they do so. **Historically, being grateful for another's hospitality became a form of reciprocity and indebtedness, where one has a social duty and obligation to do something in return for the person who did something for them.** 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, often unconsciously. **Diana Butler Bass**, when she was the speaker here at our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series in 2019, discussed this in length, following the work in her then-recent book, ***Grateful***. I commend it to your reading, which many of us did in our Book Study Group back then.

Let us look, then, at our own motivations for giving or offering favors and hospitality and gifts to others. **Verses 12-14**, therefore, give the following instructions:

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your [siblings in Christ] 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 have dinner with our friends. Rather, he is calling for behavior that lives out this conviction about being an inclusive part of the kingdom of God. **We are called to invite to the table – into our fellowship – those who have little or no status in society, those who have been ostracized, those on the margins.**

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 to the Lord's Supper, where Christ is the host and all are invited.**

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 kin-dom 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 often-uninvited to the table, and into our fellowship?**

If you are a guest, be humble.

If you are a host, be inclusive.

Let us be intentional – at least in this community of faith – to **set aside the pecking order.**

Amen.

Resources:

New Interpreter's Bible

Preaching Through the Christian Year

Interpretation: Luke