

Leave the Pecking Order to the Chickens

Being a Humble Guest and an Inclusive Host

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Last Sunday we took a look at the tale of Daniel in the Lion's Den. As was hopefully demonstrated, it takes a lot of work, including historical, textual and biblical study in order to do justice to a thoughtful interpretation of that story. All that work isn't as necessary, however, to properly understand today's Gospel reading from Luke 14. In this passage it's actually quite easy to comprehend what Jesus has to say about being a humble guest, and about being an inclusive host. For what Jesus observed 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 **the hierarchical system of social organization**.

Let's talk about pecking orders. That term comes from watching the social behavior of chickens. I found the following description on a website. "Farm kids know that chickens in the barnyard have a *pecking order* wherein one chicken pecks another but is not pecked back, in a descending order from the chicken pecked by none, down to the chicken pecked by all other chickens. This fits a *hierarchical model* known to humans since tribal days. It has been the principal model in the business world and in the military. Business types sometimes even say, 'He [or she] is next in the pecking order.'"

What, dare I ask, is your experience in playing this game – and yes, it's a game that everyone plays to some extent at one time or another, for it is deeply engrained into our culture and society – perhaps even into our very being as humans. Perhaps there was even a defined pecking order in your family when you were growing up? If so, where were you in that order? It's sometimes common, for instance, for the eldest child to think that they are more important, or have an inherent right to more privilege than their younger siblings. This is an attitude that some people even carry into adulthood. And I'm not just saying this as a bitter middle child. ☺

What about the pecking order of when you were in school? Athletes and cheerleaders were always higher in that social order than those of us in the choir, or band, or chess club. What about where you work, or in the other organizations of which you are a member?

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

It seems to be part of human nature, however, for many to have one's eye on the top rung of the ladder, to be the top chicken who rules the roost. It's amazing the lengths to which some people will go to establish their perceived sense of superiority. And they often draw blood in their quest for the top. Now, I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with occupying the top rung, someone has to be there. But **from a Christian perspective, there are right and wrong, perhaps even good and evil (and I rarely use that term), ways of getting to the top.**

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 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 – yet I realize it had more 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. Rather, it must be given by others.

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 Jesus spoke these instructions as a parable, meaning 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 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.** That 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, 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. 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.**

Let me add another warning at this point concerning Jesus' instruction to take a seat of lower prominence. Our human ego is quite clever and, upon hearing that taking a low seat may not only avoid embarrassment but may actually lead to eventual elevation to the head table, many turn Jesus' instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-promotion. Taking the low seat because a person is humble is one thing; taking the low seat only as a way to be asked to move up is another. One biblical commentator writes, "The entire message becomes a cartoon if there is a mad, competitive rush for the lowest place, with ears cocked toward the host, waiting for the call to ascend."

After these instructive observations concerning the rules of behavior in the realm or kingdom 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 kindness, generosity, graciousness, hospitality, 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 it's 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 or food or help or hospitality to those who cannot repay them, and so guest lists consist only of persons who are able to return the favor. Therefore, verses 12-14 state:

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 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 the household of God; that is, **inviting 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.

So I'll leave you with this question to reflect upon this week: How can you and I, how can we as a congregation, live by these rules of God's realm in ways that use the power, position and 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? **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