

The Humble Dinner Guest & the Inclusive Host

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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I came across a very informative quote a few years back describing a primary focus of Jesus' ministry. "**Jesus wasn't trying to tell us how to get ahead in this world. He was giving us a glimpse into the kingdom of God.** He was like a tour guide preparing us to enter a foreign land. He was explaining local customs and rules of the road. He was preparing us so that we wouldn't get a rude shock when we entered the kingdom of God with its very different culture. **He was inviting us to start living by Kingdom Rules so that we could start life in the kingdom of God here and now.**" (Richard Donovan, 2007)

That's a very fitting description to help explain Jesus' instructions in today's Gospel Lesson from Luke 14 about being a humble guest and an inclusive host.

This is how the story unfolds. Jesus is eating dinner on the Sabbath at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. This Pharisee had invited a number of people, and they were jockeying for the best seats – the "places of honor" – the dinner seats nearest the host. That's where everyone wanted to sit because it would make him or her look and feel more important. Instead of being humble, **the guests were trying to define a proper pecking order – trying to decide who was more important than whom.**

Speaking of a pecking order, what is your experience in playing this game – and yes, it's a game that everyone plays. Perhaps there was 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 brother or sister to think that they are more important, or have more rights, than their younger siblings. This is an attitude that some carry into adulthood.

What about the pecking order at where you work, or go to school, or in the other organizations of which you are a member? Would you say that there is a pecking order here at College Hill?

Do you know why they even call it a "pecking order"? I remembered that it has something to do with chickens. So to learn more about it I got on the Internet and did a Google search on: "chicken pecking order". The results: nearly 100,000 websites. Some are quite bizarre, like how to train a chicken, or how to deal with an aggressive hen, or how to understand hen-house politics. One particularly helpful website, however, gave a very succinct synopsis of moving from the realm of a chicken coop on a farm to how the term "pecking order" is applied to human behavior as it pertains to the need for dominance. Here's a bit of that information:

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.

It's true. In our society today a lot of people have their eye on the top rung of the ladder, to be the chicken that rules the roost. And **it's amazing the lengths to which some people will go to establish their assumed superiority over others.** And, like chickens, they sometimes draw blood in their quest to reach the top. Now, let me clarify, **there's nothing wrong with occupying the top rung, the top position, but for Christians there are right ways and wrong ways of getting there.**

Today's Gospel lesson gives Jesus' perspective on this phenomenon we know as "climbing the social ladder" as he observes the behavior of guests at a dinner party. Upon observing them scramble to places of honor closest to the host, Jesus advises choosing the lowest place, far removed from the head table. In doing so, one avoids public embarrassment if asked by the host to sit in another seat. And, on occasion, may even be called up to a higher place of honor. **Honor, by the way, is not gained by seizing prominence; it must be given by others.**

In and of itself, 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 but behavior of those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus.

What Jesus has in mind is proper behavior in the kingdom 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: When we try to manipulate, intimidate, bully and compromise our way to the top, we are simply setting ourselves up for a great fall. Why? Because rank and position don't carry any weight in God's eyes. That's because **all people are of equal value to God, no matter their position in society or their economic or immigration status. And let us all remember that our worth is not measured by recognition from others, but by the certainty that God has accepted us.**

After these observations concerning the rules of behavior in the kingdom of God about being a humble dinner guest, Jesus turns to give a lesson about being an inclusive dinner host. Jesus observes 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. It's the worst kind of hospitality, for it's motivation takes on a self-serving purpose.

Again, Jesus is not giving lessons on social graces. The point is that **hosting can be a way of making others feel they are in your debt, so that they in turn will reciprocate when preparing their guest list. This scripture passage reveals that a host who expects a return on his or her behavior will tend to not offer service or food or help 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 calling for behavior that lives out this conviction about the kingdom of God; that is, inviting to the table – into our fellowship – those who have little or no status or place in society.

By application, this has a lot to say about whom we invite and demonstrate hospitality to here at the church? For example, **may it never be the case that we are more inviting to those who seem to have a higher social standing than to those who do not.**

There are, of course, overtones to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in all of this – Jesus' dinner party, so to speak – the eternal banquet in the kingdom of God. **It is Jesus who models how to be an inclusive host, and reminds us that everyone is invited. That is why we celebrate an "open" Communion, for it is Christ who invites all to come and taste and see the goodness of God, and to experience God's grace and presence among and within us.**

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 kingdom in ways that use the power and position 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 hard to leave the pecking order to the chickens.

Amen.