

## BANQUET ETIQUETTE

8.31.25 Pentecost 12  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

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I remember well the summer following my first year of seminary. I was serving in an internship, working with five churches in a cooperative ministry in a different part of NC. The second weekend I was there, I was invited to one of the smaller churches for their annual senior citizens recognition banquet. Being new, and knowing that it included a meal, I readily accepted. I felt like this would give me a good opportunity to get to know some of the members of that congregation better. I arrived early for the banquet, and stood around visiting with some of the church members until time for the meal, at which time I automatically took a seat at the rear of the room. After all, this was over forty years ago, I was a seminary student, and this was a senior citizens' recognition banquet. But as I was taking my seat, they said, "Oh, you can't sit there. You must sit with the pastor at the head table." I politely protested, but they insisted. I must confess that I felt a bit awkward at that head table, especially since it was a senior citizens' dinner. I also felt unnecessarily honored.

Jesus' words to us in our Gospel lesson for today are both theological and practical. Through the years I have attended more than a few wedding rehearsal dinners where I knew hardly anyone other than the bride and the groom, which is OK. The problem comes in knowing where to sit, especially if there are not name cards at the tables. Sometimes the pastor is seated at the head table, and sometimes not, and it really does not matter to me, as long as I am invited! To avoid the awkwardness of not knowing where to sit, I simply stand around and chat until I am told where to sit. That eliminates the possibility of embarrassment that Jesus illustrates in our Gospel lesson for this morning.

In fact, Proverbs 25:6-7, our OT lesson for today, is considered by many scholars to be the basis for Jesus' teaching in our Gospel lesson. It's easy to see how Jesus could have based the parable upon these words: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

But Jesus is actually making a bigger and more important point here, for he is telling us that we should be modest and humble; that we should not seek to draw attention to ourselves. The great preacher Fred Craddock observes that what Jesus really has in mind here is "kingdom behavior," as can be seen in his statement in verse 11, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus' words here, especially when viewed through the perspective of Jesus' own life, suggest a new way of being in the world. Jesus seeks to free us from a world in which value is defined by our grasping at status, in which people are judged by highest and lowest. Besides, honor is not gained by seizing prominence; it must be given by others.

Let's face it. Humble behavior and an attitude of humility are not highly valued in our world today. In fact, our society views those who are humble as human doormats, as people who are pushovers and can be easily taken advantage of. Two generations ago, to say that someone was a humble person was quite a compliment; today, it is almost an insult!

Part of Jesus' reason for telling this story is to remind us to be humble. We are not to call attention to ourselves. The problem is that we all like to be seen, to be noticed, to be recognized. Human nature is such that we want to be popular, we want to be liked and to feel important.

This is why things have gotten so rough for some of our youth today. Peer pressure is quite strong for them to go along with the gang, even when the gang is doing something completely contrary to God's will. But we are called to be strong and seek out God's will, be more humble, be less recognized, if necessary, and act like followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In contrast, the NT scholar William Barclay wrote about a man whom he and others considered to be humble. "[This person] would never enter a room first, but would always defer to others, saying, 'You go first, I will follow.' Once, as he came on a platform, there was a great burst of applause in welcome. He stood aside and let the man after him come first and began himself to applaud. He never dreamed that the applause could possibly be for him; he thought it must be for the other man." And yet, he was the one whom they were recognizing!<sup>ii</sup>

We would do well to remember, though, that humility is not to be feigned as a strategy for recognition. To the contrary, "humility is a quality of life open to persons who know that their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers, but by the certainty that God has accepted them."<sup>iii</sup>

The other issue in our Gospel lesson for today is status. In these verses Jesus shows us quite clearly that status in human eyes and status in God's eyes are two completely different things. In order for us to serve God, Jesus tells us to stop serving ourselves and to serve others, especially those who can't return the favor, such as the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, those who for one reason or another are not able to do for themselves. We are to be on the lookout for and minister to the needs of the most vulnerable of our society, those whom others might well try to take advantage of.

Years ago the United Methodist Men's group in a church where I was pastor invited a representative from Joni and Friends to be a guest speaker at one of our meetings. This is the ministry that was started by Joni Eareckson Tada, a ministry whose mission is "to bring practical help and Gospel hope to people with disabilities around the world." This speaker pointed out to us that less than 10% of the disabled are in church, partly because our buildings and facilities exclude them, and partly because we unintentionally exclude the disabled. But, in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus specifically tells us that we need to be in ministry with those who are less fortunate than ourselves; specifically, the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. Jesus leaves us with no option on this matter.

After all, just look at who Jesus' friends were. Jesus always seemed to make time for those who were disabled, and he healed them. Jesus was also a friend of publicans and sinners. He ate and drank with the outcasts of his society. He spent the majority of his time with people that society considered worthless, and let them know that they were important and were people of worth in God's eyes.

One scholar reminds us that "Jesus admonishes both the guests and the host to stop calculating the personal advantages to every action and to give and take instead with no strings or price tags attached. Jesus' words are not to be restricted to the realm of social etiquette, though. We should not come away from this lesson simply with the sense that our lives should be marked with polite gestures of humility. Rather, our lives should be marked with the willingness to enter fully into the 'lowest place,' [wherever that place may be]. We are to embrace a new place of life, grounded in the knowledge that all people have equal access to God's table."<sup>iv</sup>

The New Interpreter's Bible, in the conclusion of its discussion of our Gospel lesson, states: "Righteousness, not social position or the esteem of others, should be our goal. God does not look on the glitter of our guest list. Instead, God looks to see that we have practiced the

generosity and inclusiveness of the kingdom in our daily social relationships. One standard offers the reward of social position, the other the reward of God's favor."<sup>v</sup>

Who are we to be proud before God? Who are we to be so presumptuous as to take a seat at the head table in God's kingdom? After all, who created us? Who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for our sins? Who has power over sin and death, and offers us the hope of eternal life? Before God, we should be humble, lowly, and meek, but yet God calls us each one unto him. From our Gospel lesson for today I feel that it is clear how we should respond to God for all that he has done for us. We should respond humbly and meekly, with thankful and grateful hearts.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year C: After Pentecost* (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1986), 150.

<sup>ii</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia:Westminster Press, 1975), 190.

<sup>iii</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Proclamation 3: Pentecost 2* (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1986), 39.

<sup>iv</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *Proclamation 4: Pentecost 2* (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1989), 38.

<sup>v</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. 9, 288.