

"Dinner with a View"
Rachel Callender
November 15th, 2020

Have you ever heard the story of the young minister, right out of a fancy seminary, who wrote a fantastic sermon on humility? It was his first sermon and he was eager for a large, attentive audience to hear what he had put together. He'd done so much work on this masterpiece that he was so full of his own importance. He stepped up to the pulpit with tremendous confidence, his shoulders were back, his chin held high, he's Mr. Big-Shot; heck, he knew he was going to get cheers for a sermon like this.

But once up there, he completely blanked out and couldn't think of a single thing. He scrambled through his notes but just couldn't grasp the footing he imagined he would. Finally, he stepped down from the pulpit utterly humiliated. All he wanted to do was get out of there without making eye-contact with anyone. As he slumped down the steps, an old preacher turned to him and said, 'Young man, if you'd gone up the way you came down, you'd have come down the way you went up.'"

"If you'd gone up the way you came down, you'd have come down the way you went up."

In today's text, Jesus has been invited to yet another fancy dinner-party, which was a prime time for setting up an "us vs then" sort of groundwork. Perhaps this is the Thanksgiving dinner setup you're expecting soon. He's made quite a name for Himself so people like having Him on their guest-list, but they also want to see if they can expose Him for not being on their side. The text begins by saying:

"On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely."

At this dinner, these religious leaders had done everything they could to look good but strategically so, in comes a sick man. Just prior to this text, Jesus has just healed a woman on the sabbath and had already made the point that helping someone is more important than keeping a law or keeping face.

Here, He's put in the same position and is once again frustrated. Instead of cross-examining Jesus, He cross-examines them, and no-one dares speak, and with that Jesus heals the man.

This all brings us into today's reading: "When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable." Yes, they invited Him there to watch Him closely, but He was also watching them and was not happy with the boundary lines He saw being drawn from the get-go.

Now, let's be honest for a moment. Jesus does not always make for a fun dinner guest. This is just one of many texts where Jesus is invited to a meal and ends up revealing to the other people their own shortcomings. In fact, it almost seems like the only times when Jesus goes to a meal and just simply enjoys the company He's with is when He's breaking bread with those who were divided out of the elite group: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the poor, those with disabilities. Which begs today's question: with how we live here and now, how we speak about those around us: **Are we ready to have Jesus as our dinner guest?**

Here in this text, Jesus illustrates a need for humility.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

The kind of seating arrangement that Jesus is talking about here is most likely of a "U" shape which was a regular practice in Palestine at the time. The host would sit in the middle, or top or the "U", and the best spot for a guest was at their right hand. Next would be their left and it would go back and fourth until the ends of the table were reached. So, what he's saying here, is stop rushing for the right hand of the host, the prime spot that proves that you are in the "in" crowd, but pick that last spot on the left all the way at the end, where the "other" would most normally sit.

But humility is a tricky line, right? It's not like it's a characteristic that can authentically be put on a job application under "STRENGTHS". Once you start to feel like you're being humble, you're already not! What is even being asked of us? To go sit on the floor, venerate everyone above us and hope some of their crumbs will fall to feed us humble sinners? To have no opinions about anything as a means of avoiding being divisive? Is that really what being a true Christ-follower means?

No! Christ was very opinionated. To be the guest Christ is calling us to be in this passage, the first point we need to understand is that humility is not low self-esteem.

What's the old quote? "On the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom." In this text where Christ is challenging people to live more humbly and to put ourselves in the shoes of those who are often divided out of the main group, He is not telling them that they shouldn't like themselves. Humility is even defined simply as a "modest opinion of one's own importance or rank". It's to say that if sitting in the lowest spot is telling your neighbors, the other guests, that you find them to be worthy and have value, that differences between you two are not obstacles of separation but a celebration of God's diversity, that you regard others highly as other images of God, why would we not be fighting over that last chair? Perhaps by sitting in that last chair, you're making a statement of praise over someone's worth who's never heard that before, someone who so desperately needs that message today. Maybe by putting yourself in their seat or their shoes, you see God's kingdom in a whole new way.

Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A great man is always willing to be little."

How often are we so stuck in *our* spot, on *our* side and pass up opportunities for compassion and a willingness to hear and understand others.

Theologian Desmond Tutu once said, "Arrogance really comes from insecurity, and in the end our feeling that we are bigger than others is really the flip side of our feeling that we are smaller than others."

When we fight to be seen as more important or as part of the "in" crowd, what is that saying about our faith? What insecurities in our own trust in God are we trying to cover up? Who are we so desperate to prove that we're not?

It has been said that, "from lowliness springs gratitude". We have already been offered grace, why do we also need top chair? By taking that low chair, recognizing God's grace that lives in all others, we can create more dialogue, more understanding, more empathy for people who look, speak, act, believe, politicize differently than us.

There's an Arabian Proverb that translates to, "Arrogance diminishes wisdom." In Greece, at the Academy of Athens, the boys would have three years of schooling. The first year, they were called "The Wise Men". The second year, they would be called "Those Who Love Wisdom". And in their third and final year of schooling they would simply be called, "The Learners". The more you know the more you realize there's so much to learn.

By proving we're better than someone else, what does that say to others about what we don't know about God? I was warned when I first went to seminary: "There's a lot of flexers, people who want to prove they are part of the group who deserve to be here and not those who are just lucky to be here." It's tough though to not want to flip it! To prove that I'm actually the one in the right, and they're the "other". To simply just say, "I know my calling. That's as much of what I have control over." Author Christie Hartman once said,

"Don't confuse confidence with arrogance. Arrogance is being full of yourself, feeling you're always right, and believing your accomplishments or abilities make you better

than other people. People often believe arrogance is excessive confidence, but it's really a lack of confidence. Arrogant people are insecure, and often repel others. Truly confident people feel good about themselves and attract others to them."

Where we sit says something about our faith. Is it attracting others to us, or repelling them?

Which brings me to my next point, we should change our invitations from "private" to "public".

Jesus ends this parable by saying, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This sounds kind of familiar, right? "the first will be last and the last will be first"? It's from the chapter just before this one. Those who show kindness towards others, show love for their neighbor will be *given* honor, not those who try to take honor.

Which leads us to how Jesus has not only been watching how the guests sat, but also what the hosts have done:

"He said also to those who had invited Him, '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 may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, those with disabilities, the one's who never get invited. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of righteousness.'"

Notice here that Jesus isn't telling them to just meet the basic needs of the outcasts but is saying that that they have a responsibility in a place a privilege to cross over division, to

invite those who are normally silenced to speak, to recognize the harm that has come from creating spaces of "us" and "them". Author Steve Goodier offers this reflection:

"Several years ago, an older friend of mine developed Alzheimer's disease. Bill had lived an active and productive professional life. But in his later years, his wife cared for him at home. He was aware of his increasing dependency on her and of the debilitating effect of the disease on his mind. Bill gave up everything he had ever done for himself until eventually nothing was left. As his mind suffered, his sense of worthiness also took a beating. He felt as if he were nobody.

"There was one group to which he belonged that decided to stay with him during his decline. He sat on the University of Denver Board of Trustees and was encouraged by them to continue attending meetings as long as he was able. One of the board members drove Bill to the meetings and brought him back home afterward. This continued even after he had lost his ability to remember names, track a conversation or participate in any meaningful way.

"His wife knew that he remained a board member in name only and that their decision to include him was made solely out of compassion. But Bill seemed to enjoy himself at the meetings and she reasoned that they were probably good for him. After he returned from one such meeting of the trustees, his wife asked him, 'Did you have a good meeting, Bill?'

"He thought for a moment before replying. Then he answered quite honestly, 'I don't know.' After a pause, however, he added this heartfelt comment: 'But they still think I'm a people.'

"To them, he was somebody. To them, he mattered. He was still a person of value and worth. He could no longer read or write or do any of the things that had been important earlier. But he was still 'a people.' This day, somebody needs to know, from each of us, that they're 'a people'."

When we invite those to the table who usually aren't invited, and then offer them the top seat, just imagine for a moment about what that says. What does that say about the inclusivity of God's grace, and the way we as Christians can be a witness to that? What does that say about us not allowing division to take over?

Which brings me to my third and final thought: It may be time we learn new table manners.

What's being asked of us here is to humble ourselves down to recognize that how we speak, what we do, where we sit, affects those around us. There's an old saying that the entrance to heaven is so low that one can only enter on their knees. Here, in this text, Jesus uses a wedding banquet as an example as weddings were often compared to God's kingdom in heaven: a marriage between Christ and the church. This is Kingdom Talk.

Christ is saying that these guests are playing by a set of cultural rules and regulations while the laws of heaven are of a complete reversal. He is challenging them to think about their actions here and now: start practicing Kingdom dinner manners now or they're in for quite a shock when the person they made give up their seat for them or that they wouldn't even invite to their party is invited to sit at the right hand of the Host of Heaven while they're stuck in the rusty broken chair by the bathroom. How is where you're sitting a witness to God's kingdom

here on earth? Is there a seat change you can make that could bring others closer to God?

English pastor, F.B. Meyer once said, "I used to think that God's gifts were on shelves one above the other; and that the taller we grew in Christian character the easier we could reach them. I now find that God's gifts are on shelves one beneath the other; and that it is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower; and that we have to go down, always down, to get His best gifts."

Humility is essential for crossing over lines of division. It's what makes us see others as valuable, it's what makes us reflect on ourselves and go, "Maybe the world is bigger and more complex than what I know and believe."

Try going up the way you usually go down, see everyone you meet as, "a people", and grab yourself the last chair. It's only proper manners.

BENEDICTION (based on 1 Corinthians 1:10)

The Lord our God has appealed to us to find places of agreement with one another in what we say and that there be no divisions among us, but that we be perfectly united in mind and thought. May we go from this place seeking that within ourselves so that a spirit of unity may spread across the whole world.

Go in Peace. Go with God. Amen.