

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Exaltation and Humiliation

There is a Kenny Chesney song entitled, “You Win, I Win, We Lose.” It is a country music song and I am not much into country music so I confess I have never heard the song. But it reminds me of a much older Jackson Browne song called, “Tender Is the Night,” that has the same line in it and I would guess that Chesney borrowed the line from the Jackson Browne song. It is about a couple whose relationship has gone sour and they are arguing all the time. You win, I win, we lose.

Or in “The Alphabet of Grace,” Frederick Buechner mentions in a offhanded sort of way the racial tensions in our culture and he refers to the sadness of the racial victory that is the human defeat. I think of any kind of victory in which there has to be a loser. It shouldn't be that way in relationships where if there is a loser, there is no winner.

Playing the Underdog

In Luke 14 we find Jesus teaching by observation. He was at a Sabbath meal and was looking at how the people were all angling to get places of honor at the table. Jesus taught them not to seek such places of honor because of a potentially embarrassing situation where one is humiliated publicly when they find they

are not as highly regarded as they think they should be. Conversely, he explained that with a show of humility there might be a more positive outcome when they turn out to be more highly regarded. The banquet serves as a pretty good object lesson.

Times have not changed much. People still like places of honor. The recognition that goes with those places is irresistible. The problem is, of course, that proud people can take pride in seeking lesser honor, creating a false humility. “Service without recognition” is a motto for those who do not want to be recognized for their good deeds or their accomplishments but would not mind recognition for their humility. Vanity is slippery and pride and humility are complex notions. Most of us act out of mixed motives. We all have a little vanity working in us.

High School Things

Since school started this week I thought I would make a few observations from my high school experience. There is a picture in one of my yearbooks of a girl that looked like Mariel Hemingway playing in a volleyball game. Behind her in the background of the picture one can see the bleachers on one side of the gymnasium. The bleachers are empty.

I can relate to the emptiness in that picture. I was not a football or a basketball player or a wrestler but a running geek. At my competitions there were not many people present, mostly just parents, siblings, and teammates. I took pride in running for my teammates and for the love of competition and for not needing adulation.

When I was a junior in high school I was in a study hall with, among many others, a particular girl who was a senior that year and also, during that year, started coming to my church. We never studied much in that study hall, but just socialized. There was a pretty big group of us. After she graduated she attended college at Purdue.

A year later, just after I graduated, she came home for the summer break and showed up at church one Sunday. We had an interesting encounter. I asked her how she liked Purdue and she said she loved it. I asked her if she had kept up with anyone from high school and she named two or three of her closest friends and told me what they were up to. Then I asked her about some of the other people that had been in that study hall and rather abruptly she stopped me to say that she had not kept up with any of them. "To tell you the truth," she said, "I don't really care if I ever see them again." She said it with emphasis like it was painful just to think about them.

My response was perhaps as interesting as her statement. I did not ask her why or if something had happened that had upset her. Actually I could relate to her sentiment. I was less than two weeks past my own graduation and I kind of felt the same way. I said, "I know *exactly* how you feel." And since then, I suppose like her, I haven't seen more than a small handful of people. And now, even with the internet, I would not be able to find most of them, although, after thirty-five years I no longer feel the same way. I miss them.

### The Sabbath Meal

Among the interesting things about this Sabbath meal depicted in Luke's 14th chapter is the size of the gathering. I have always been led to believe that in order to keep the Sabbath the meals were prepared the day before and the meals themselves were small gatherings, family mostly. But this meal was at the home of a prominent Pharisee and there were many guests. I don't think even if the meal was prepared earlier, they could have a banquet with many guests without working. That is an interesting thing given that the Pharisees were always watching Jesus to see what he did on the Sabbath.

But Jesus saw something else and even though he would never have said it this way he gave it a kind of anthropological analysis. He saw it in terms of honor

and shame. He noticed the way people were positioning themselves to get the best seats at the table, and he challenged the meaning of those seats.

He tells them that if they want to be exalted they should approach big social gatherings with humility in case they are invited to the places of honor, rather than arrogantly, lest they be humiliated. In other words, he gives them a strategy to win.

But I don't really believe that Jesus thought we should care about such things. His illustration about inviting the poor, the lame, the blind; the ones who are not able to repay, who have no position or higher status to offer, confirms my hunch that Jesus was playing with them a little bit.

A show of humility as a tactic to achieve higher honor is merely a disguised form of arrogance. It does not seem to make sense that Jesus wanted his disciples to pursue such things at all. But then, what *is* Jesus trying to teach them.

## Back to High School

When I was in high school I was concerned in some measure about social status. Even though I did not think of it in those terms, I was caught up in it. We all were. The kind of concern represented by seats of

honor at a banquet is just an adult form of the high school concern with popularity and may be the reason that so many of my friends were fed up with each other by the end of our time together, not because some won and some lost, but just because we played.

No one wants to have to admit they want their classmates to come and cheer for them. So we didn't do it and we didn't ask it of others. Even when we did it was often out of a strained sense of obligation and people often left at half-time after the band finished and the girls danced.

But we were all friends who had grown up together. We were a part of each other's support systems. By not showing up to even one of those volleyball games I was, in a way, telling the girl who looked like Mariel Hemingway that I did not care very much about her and her teammates. They were not worth much of my time even if she was nice to look at just for the sake of it.

And by not showing up to any of my races my friends were saying that they didn't care about me and by not wanting them to come anyway, because I did not want to appear vain, we not only avoided humiliation, we also just avoided each other and maybe that explains why when we graduated we didn't care if we ever saw each other again.

What Jesus was saying is that our place at the table with our neighbors and friends is meaningful on its own and we should not be concerned with artificial honor because if we are we will miss the greatest gift we are given on this earth, which is each other.

In addition to vanity, there is a little authentic humility in each of us too. Every now and again by the Grace of God, we sometimes see in others, and even sometimes in ourselves, an attitude of the heart wherein we honestly act out of the center of our being with no concern for what people might think or even if they notice. Sometimes we can serve without thinking about what we might gain from our service. That is when we have the chance to win and when we win like that everybody wins because it doesn't matter who we sit by, we are sitting by someone we love.

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