

Luke 14:1, 7-14 Humility and Exaltation
September 1, 2019

In the Great Rivers region years ago, I am not sure if they still do this now, they liked to go on short term mission trips to Costa Rica, one of the poorest, and happiest countries in the world. Once people had gone there, ostensibly to help them build churches or something, they all wanted to go back, sometimes over and over, at their own expense. The short term missionaries felt they were benefitting more than the people they were supposed to be helping. They wondered why?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is presented as preaching people away from discipleship and letting them go, impressing upon them the cost of discipleship. He speaks of a narrow door, and of the weeping and gnashing of teeth upon being thrown out of God's kingdom.

He speaks of his sorrow for Jerusalem because they were not willing to be gathered together, so to speak, like chicks under their mother's wing. This idea is illustrated by the banquet images. People getting together to eat has always been a metaphor for life in God's kingdom, and eating is always given a prominent place in Gospel lore.

There are the miraculous feedings, thousands satisfied by a few loaves of bread and some fish. And there is the Last Supper, Jesus whiling away the hours at Passover time waiting for the other shoe to drop.

In addition, there are these parables about banquets. In one of them, a wedding dinner, the door is closed to the bridesmaids who did not keep oil in their lamps and were away at the market when the groom came.

Or the one here in Luke 14, in which a whole country club of prominent citizens were invited but declined because they all had better (in their minds) things to do than show up at their neighbor's house for a feast. So the host went out and invited the not so prominent citizens, and they had a great time anyway.

The Pharisee's House

And there is the account related in today's text that is not a parable but a lesson inspired by watching the social dynamics at a banquet hosted by a pharisee, one of the prominent religious leaders. Even today at events of this kind, there is a seating chart.

More prominent guests are given better seats, closer to the front, more visible, accompanied by better guests. Proximity to the host is important because it reflects status and may even be a sign of power and influence.

Jesus turns the dynamic into an illustration to make a point to his disciples about the right attitude to these things. He tells them not to presume the best seats, because if they do, there is a risk that they might be asked to move to a seat of lesser status. On the contrary, if they seek a lesser seat, there is a chance they may be asked to move to a seat of greater status.

The main point has to do with honor and shame. Jesus is saying that in the pursuit of honor it is good not to be pretentious, to have lowered expectations. It is better to seek a modest place and then come off looking good when higher honors are bestowed, than to presume a place of high honor and be regarded as unworthy of it. It seems an obvious truth.

Honestly, it all sounds like a game to me, which I am sure it was to Jesus. In the illustration, Jesus is taking for granted that everyone who attends these functions is at least secretly pursuing high status. In the larger biblical message, it is right to conclude that one ought not to seek such places, much less play a manipulative reverse psychology game as a strategy to attain it. So what is the point of the illustration?

Reversal

Jesus speaks of a reversal of values. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” It is almost the same as another pithy little statement Jesus was known to have made, “the last shall be first, and the first last.” There is something more going on here than meets the eye, more than seating charts at a banquet.

It is in the context of humility and exaltation, or pride, that one can see most clearly what the lesson is that Jesus is trying to teach. In his illustration there are two implied characters. The first one is concerned about status and is maneuvering to “get a better place at the

table.” The second couldn’t care less and is happy wherever the place is and with whomever the table partners will be.

One is proud, the other humble. One is self-centered. the other is aware of and concerned about others. The central feature of pride *is* that it is self-centered. The central feature of humility is that it is not, but has an outward focus, is not concerned with place, has no regard for status. It is a false humility that strategizes by purposely taking the lesser place so *that* they will be asked to move up. The truly humble person is simply not concerned about such things.

Host

Then the lesson is applied in a different way. Jesus speaks to his followers not as if they are guests at a banquet, but hosts, and he tells them not to play status games with the invitation list. Rather, go out and find people who simply do not have the resources to take part in such social games, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.” And then he says, “And you will be blessed. Although *they* cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Ours is a transactional world where no one does anything without thinking in terms of what they will get out of it. Even though Jesus speaks of a heavenly reward, one gets the notion that Jesus would have us disregard even *that*. The reason he mentions an eternal reward is because there is one, and not even

he can pretend that it is not so. The premise is that if we want to be blessed, we are best if we disregard the idea of a reward altogether. If we are seeking a reward, we will miss the blessing.

That is the meaning of:

“Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me . . . “

“Whoever seeks her life, will surely lose it, but whoever loses her life . . . will save it.”

“Love is patient, love is kind, it does not demand its own way . . .”

“Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice . . .”

It is not because it is too austere or demanding that we fail to follow it, but that we are so steeped in our own self-concern, it seems too unnatural to live that way. It is not at society banquets that one is blessed because it is almost impossible to have a relationship with someone there. One has a better chance on a short term mission trip to Costa Rica, or some place like that.

Hebrews

We have read from Hebrews the last few Sundays. Even though we didn't today, the epistle reading came from chapter 13. Listen to some excerpts. Though they are somewhat different from the gospel presentation, see if you think they offer the same message:

“Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters

Do not forget to entertain strangers (for by doing so, some people have entertained angels unawares) Remember those in prison, as if you were their fellow prisoner, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Keep your lives free from the love of money, be content with what you have”

And there is the topic is the sacrifices, and the idea that the leftover meat was taken outside the city to be burned.

“So also Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the city, bearing the disgrace he bore, for here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”

It is outside the city, maybe even outside the country, with all the trappings of materialism and wealth and power and status, that we can meet on something like level ground, fertile for the kind of blessing the bible speaks about, the kind we will find in heaven.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise . . . And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices, God is pleased.”

Amen

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