

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 28, 2022

Today's gospel reading is from a passage in which Luke brings together teachings and sayings of Jesus under the umbrella of the image of a great feast. As Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem and all that awaits him there, he teaches his followers about the qualities necessary for membership in the realm of God. Today, the focus is on humility. There are moments in this reading when we might think we're listening to advice on etiquette, but in the Bible, the feast, and especially the wedding banquet, is always a symbol or image of God's reign. What appear to be rules of good manners are really principles of attitude that carry eternal spiritual significance.

In the ancient Near East, honour was all-important. Feuds flared and wars were fought over points of honour – personal honour, family honour, national honour. Honour required a person to make elaborate gestures of hospitality toward one's guests. Honour required that a person be treated and treat others with the deference appropriate for each person's age and station in life. To be denied such treatment was an insult that could not be overlooked. Failure to show proper hospitality to a guest brought shame on one's whole family.

People in biblical times used food and drink both as nourishment and as a way of saying something to each other (in fact, I think we still do). A meal to which others were invited was an important form of communication. Significant social messages were exchanged between host and guests, as well as with those who had not been invited or who had declined the invitation. The food and drink for the occasion – their quality, preparation, and method of service – the seating arrangements – all of these communicated something about the host's regard for the guests. The places of greatest honour were to the right and left of the host. The further away a guest was seated was evidence to everyone of his or her lower status in the eyes of the host.

Luke has a special fondness for banquet scenes. More than any of the other evangelists, he portrays Jesus at table as teacher and nourisher of the people. Today, the scene is a sabbath meal at the home of a Pharisee, a group noted for their scrupulous adherence to the Law of Moses. Jesus is both carefully observed and careful observer.

When Pharisees were invited to a home, they expected to be seated in a place of honour, and they usually were. Their presence reflected well on the host, and they knew it. After noting their jockeying for the privileged seats, Jesus begins to teach.

There are two sets of teachings here – advice to guests and advice to hosts. They are structured in much the same way:

1. When you are invited, or when you give a feast, do not do such and such, lest something unwanted happen.
2. But when you are invited, or when you give a feast, do this instead.
3. Then you will be honoured or blessed.
4. The teaching concludes with its application to the reign of God.

Advice to guests

Jesus notices that he is being watched for his ritual observance. In an episode similar to last week's reading but not included in our passage today, he confronts the lawyers and Pharisees by healing a man on the sabbath, that is, performing work. Then he exposes the guests' maneuvering in words drawn directly from the scriptures, from the book of Proverbs.

The wisdom quoted by Jesus is a form of teaching about etiquette, warning that embarrassment will befall those who push themselves forward too brashly. Much more preferable is that unassuming behaviour that allows praise and honour to be given by others. Humility in this context is a profoundly social virtue. It tells you your place and role in the community. Humility prevents you from making a social fool of yourself. Because you have a clear understanding of who you are, where you come from, and what you are or are not able to do, you know your place in life. You are socially secure. (Side note – we must also be careful not to use teachings about humility to maintain unjust and oppressive social structures.)

But Jesus is not concerned merely with good manners. We must not reduce his teaching to advice about social graces. From what follows, we can see that Jesus is trying to lift the attention of his companions from etiquette to eschatology. This is about the reign of God. First, Jesus refers, not to a place two or three steps below one's station, but to the lowest place. Luke's readers would be quick to remember Jesus's saying that the first will be last and the last first. Secondly, the word for honour is usually translated as "glory". It points the hearer beyond the recognition they might receive from others to the glory that belongs to God, and that only God can give. Jesus is not simply exhorting the guests to play the social game more cleverly. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." More important than social standing in the eyes of others is one's good standing in the eyes of God. In the economy of God's realm, worldly standards and values are turned upside down. The person who asserts their importance has already been rewarded with the fleeting and dubious dignity that self-assertion brings. The truthful person who recognizes the greatness of God as well as their own lowliness and need will one day share the honour and glory of union with God at the banquet that never ends.

Advice to hosts

Hosts are no more innocent of the quest for recognition than are guests. The Pharisee who invited Jesus has also invited others like himself: friends, relatives, and wealthy people whose presence will reflect well on the host and his household. These people are able, and indeed are expected, to return the hospitality. Jesus does not simply advise against inviting such people to curry favour or to benefit ourselves. The community and sharing of life and bread which takes place around the table is too sacred to be perverted for personal advantage. Don't even invite the wealthy and powerful, he says, because they will only invite you in turn. Instead, invite those who have never had such a meal, who could never return the favour, who will never be your superiors.

In the social give and take of his day, Jesus's advice must have seemed shocking, even ridiculous. Not only would these people bring no prestige by their presence; they were likely considered ritually unclean, because physical disability was so often equated with sin. The poor, the maimed, the lame and blind were regarded as sinners, pure and simple (another assumption we need to challenge).

Once again, Jesus challenges us with the reversal of values that is part and parcel of the good news of God's reign of justice and mercy. From the beginning of his mission, Jesus showed God's special love for the poor and lame, the blind, the widows and orphans. Those whom the world rejected would be the special guests at the banquet in the realm of God. Jesus challenged his disciples to show the same love and hospitality to the outcast and downtrodden as they would have liked to exchange with wealthy and well-placed members of society. In doing so, they would be living the truth of the good news and their humility would be eternally rewarded by God himself. God is ultimately the only one who can bless us, or whose praise matters.

Genuine humility, then, is nothing more or less than truth. It means seeing ourselves as God sees us – as fallen creatures yet redeemed, as weak yet made strong by grace, as talented while not the source of those talents. The more clearly we see ourselves as God sees us, the more we will acknowledge our dependence on God.

Such truth is liberating. It frees us from the need to succeed in our culture's contests for power and esteem. The truth of humility frees us from relationships of dominance and submission and the barriers such relationships create. We are free from suspicion and fear, from the necessity to put down others to enhance our self-esteem. Under the liberty of humility, we can create truly human community and enjoy the security of God's grace, where the only success that

counts is to grow in holiness and become more and more like the one whose disciples we are.
Amen.