

C Lectionary 22 9.1.19

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Focus Statement: God wants for us all to have exactly what we need to thrive.

This morning's passage is a bit of a weird one. On first read through it always feels a bit like a page from the book "How to Win Friends and Influence People," like Jesus is giving sage advice for social climbing. Our text this morning started out with Jesus noticing how the guests were jockeying for position at the table to guarantee themselves a place of honor. This is one of those places where first century culture and our culture differ, so it's important to stress just how much of a big deal seating assignments were. In a society where one's social standing affected one's access, to be seen as more or less important in the eyes of the culture, was crucial. So at first, Jesus' advice here, to take not just a lower seat, but the lowest seat at a party, so that the host will need to point out your humility and raise you to a higher place, seems like nothing more than good advice for social climbing. If you take a seat lower than the one you deserve, not only will you not get the humiliation of being moved down in rank, but you will get the added glory of having your humility on display, thus earning you an even higher ranking and more social status, this person is important AND humble, what a winner!

But humility for the sake of humility is not actually humility at all. Maybe you're familiar with the concept of the humble brag? The social media trope of putting oneself down for the purpose of fishing for compliments. That sort of self-deprecation isn't humility at all, it is in itself a sort of gamesmanship, of using humility to draw attention to yourself. And what's more, if the advice was to take a low seat so that you could be raised up, Jesus never took that advice. Jesus took the low seat all the time, but not so that others would thing

better of him. In fact, his taking of the low seat is what got him killed. Jesus hung out with beggars and thieves and outcasts because Jesus genuinely wanted to spend time with those people, not as some sort of show of what a great egalitarian hero he was. And I wonder if he wants to spend time with the bottom of the social status people not only because he cared about those whom others had overlooked, but also because they were less annoying than those at the top of society. When you're already at the bottom you don't need to flaunt your humility, and there is a certain freedom in that, an honesty that is refreshing for those of us who are stuck in the game. So, I don't think what's going on here is Jesus giving advice for more effective social climbing. But what is going on here?

More than just successfully navigating the social game, what I think Jesus was doing here was completely throwing out the social order entirely. Taking the lowest seat at the table isn't about getting to be raised up to the higher one, its about making a statement about the value of ranking people in the first place. When Rose Parks sat in the front of the bus, she wasn't making a statement about her personal value against everyone else on the bus, she was making statement about the entire concept of grouping people by the color of their skin. Taking a place of lower status when society thinks you clearly deserve a different one puts the spotlight on the entire unjust system and forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about the nature of power, who has it and who wields it. The good news in this first half of Jesus parable is for those who find themselves cast down to lower status, because Jesus is saying, that position is a false position. In the kingdom of God those who exalt themselves shall be lowered, and those who lower themselves shall be exalted, and I think by default then, those who do not lower themselves, but are lowered by others, will too find

themselves lifted up in the great upswelling of the kingdom of God. The challenge is for us who have some power in society, those of us who have something to lose. Which, pro tip, is all of us in one way or another. The challenge for us is to be on the lookout for those who have been unjustly demeaned, to put ourselves alongside of them and shine a light on the injustice. This is delicate work, for it is all too easy in doing this to shine a light on our own nobility and “wokeness,” but it is the work I think Jesus is calling us to. In the topsy-turvy calculus of the kingdom of God, my honor means nothing if it comes at the sake of someone else’s.

And Jesus didn’t just have instruction on how to be a good guest, he also had words for the hosts of the party. “When you give a luncheon or a dinner,” Jesus said, “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed... for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” At first read, again, great advice for social climbing. Invite those lower on the social ladder than you, and you look like a great person for being so open and welcoming. But then I thought about it from the point of view of the poor, the lame, the crippled, those being invited to the dinner party for the sake of meeting Jesus’ words and I wondered, do they even want to come to the dinner party? Would they feel comfortable there? Would there be accommodations made for them so that they could participate fully? Or would they be on display, look at this poor person I invited to my party, what a great person am I! And again, if this is Jesus’ advice, Jesus never followed it. Jesus threw a couple of dinner parties in his day, think the feeding of the five-thousand or the post-resurrection breakfast on the beach, but in neither of them did Jesus specifically invite those in need. In

the feeding of the five thousand there was no guest list at all, it was just food for whoever happened to be on the hill. And the breakfast on the beach was a very specific guest list, just his closest followers. And anyway, Jesus was way more likely to be a guest, to be the one doing the uncomfortable work of culturally commuting to a different group. So again, what's going on here?

I think the good news in this parable is God wants and expects that everyone is invited to the party. When you feel excluded or overlooked by others, the good news here is Jesus is making a very firm stance on the expansiveness of welcome. The challenge is for us who find ourselves in the hosting role. This parable of Jesus means we need to find ways to make our gatherings accessible to all whom God wants included. As we talked about as we were going through the RIC process, it is not enough to say "all are welcome" and then not do the work to make sure that all really does mean all. Rather, what matters is to first do the background work so that we can then make a very specific invitation. You are welcome, and you will know you are welcome because I have done the work in advance to make sure I am prepared to be a good host. We're doing this ADA work now, to make sure our building is accommodating to people with a variety of disabilities, and the question we keep asking as council is how can we be as accessible as possible to as many different people as possible. ADA has very specific requirements, but like any list of regulations, they need to be tailored to fit our unique setting. Like, for example, per ADA, our handicapped spots in the front of the building are not valid because, fairly, they force you to walk in what is a lane of traffic. True ADA-approved handicapped spots need to be in the parking lot, one for every twenty-five spots, and one spot specifically to accommodate a

handicapped van, which means a designated walkway on either side to accommodate a wheelchair ramp. So, in the interest of accessibility and being ADA compliant, we're working on getting the parking lot ready to make those spots. But, for a lot of our community, both in the congregation and the Co-op, the problem isn't a handicapped van so much as its limited mobility, and the difficulty in walking all the way from the parking lot to the door. So, even though the front spots are not really valid handicapped spots, we talked in council about how we're going to keep them, and maybe even get them signs to indicate they are for people with limited mobility, so that in our efforts to be ADA compliant we don't accidentally become less accessible rather than more. And, let me encourage you to say thank you to Wayne, who spent an entire afternoon measuring and calculating the square footage of the parking lot, and Tish who called multiple asphalt companies, and ended up finding one who filled the pot holes for free, and to thank Diane Andert and Kendra in advance, because when you're trying to think about how to make your building accessible, it's super helpful to have people helping you who think through how to make spaces accessible for a living.

Yes, it's a lot of work and no, it's not going to be cheap. But it's important work, and I think it's even kingdom work, to make sure that when we invite people into our space, when we welcome people to our building, that we know we have done the work in advance to make sure that they truly are able to come and participate fully, in all ways. Not as tokens of how welcoming we are, but as full participants with gifts to give and wisdom to share. And we will be blessed. Not just at the resurrection of the righteous, but right now, with the gifts and wisdom that come from experiences not our own. Thanks be to God. Amen.