

Pentecost 15C, Proper 17. August 28, 2016. Luke 14: 1, 7-14

At first this gospel passage seems a bit banal, with little of the spiritual fire that is likely to send us diving more deeply into the love of God. A glancing read shows us solid advice for the subtle social climber. Emily Post's guide to etiquette, as revised by Machiavelli. Perhaps we take note of how best to advance a cause that we hadn't really considered as having much to do with Christianity before: how to improve our social standing. Ah, the next time the boss has us all over, I'll conduct myself humbly, while *that guy* will push himself forward too much and end up looking like an odious social climber, while I will behave with restraint, and thus climb without odium. It would probably work, because while our culture doesn't really value humility, we have a nagging suspicion that we should. But it's a little hard to fit this MachiaEmilyPostian advice into the priorities of the gospel. Who cares about social advancement? Well, okay, so all of us do. But why does Jesus care? That's the weird part.

Well, if we look a little closer, we get some hints that he doesn't. Our standing in the hierarchy of coolest people in the room isn't what's really at stake here. Our first hint that something else may be going on comes in the first verse of the reading: "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." Jesus is still on his way from his hometown of Nazareth to the capitol, Jerusalem, where he will be killed. He's with the religious leaders who will eventually lead the charge to have him executed by the government, and he is under surveillance. This is not the kind of party at which one casually criticizes the manners of those at the table, without a deeper purpose.

And second, notice that it is a meal, and even a meal on the Sabbath. I am increasingly becoming convinced that the holiest thing we humans do together as a matter of routine is eat together. I think this view is scripturally based. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is constantly sitting down to eat and the meal never passes without something crucial happening or being said. And as Episcopalians, who make the Eucharist—a holy meal God sets for us—the center of our weekly worship, no meal is uninfected with the holy. This central meal of our lives that we will share in about fifteen minutes echoes through all our meals, as the Last Supper Jesus shared with his friends echoes through our Eucharist and our whole lives. When Jesus sits down to break bread, Episcopalians take note. Something big is going to happen.

And the final clue is a little more subtle. It perhaps takes someone with a lot of student loan debt from seminary to tell you about. In the sentence after the etiquette advice, Jesus says "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In Luke, when Jesus uses the passive voice like this, the agent tends to be God. This is another way of saying, "God will humble those who exalt themselves, and God will exalt those who humble themselves." And with that, we have crossed into a whole new territory. Suddenly, the table isn't just a meal in some guy's house one Friday night in some obscure town in the Middle East, to be forgotten after a similar meal the next Friday night. Suddenly, the table is reality in microcosm, the host is God, and the guests are all of us.

What is at stake is not codes of shame and honor in an ancient society, but the customs of the kingdom of God. Jesus is not really giving advice on how to get ahead in this society—he is calling us now to engage in the normal behavior of the family of God,

which is deeply at odds with the expectations of his society and ours. This may have benefits today, such as getting promoted to the head table, but that's not the point, as illustrated by Jesus', shall we say, advice to the host.

Jesus alludes to the ancient (and modern) practice of using the holy leisure of eating together as a means of satisfying ambition. You invite someone fancy to your dinner, in hopes that they will in turn invite you to their dinner, which will enhance your place in the world. It's analogous to giving to charity for the sake of the tax benefits, or driving by three families broken down on the road, but then seeing Bill Gates broken down and suddenly feeling a call to be helpful to your fellow human being. This inclination toward doing the calculations of self-benefit, of determining the personal payoff, for every act within a relationship is a persistent instinct for us. We learn *quid pro quo* and "give a little to get a lot" early in our lives. And the shocking, radical finale of Jesus' lesson in improper manners is that this kind of calculation has no place in God's reign.

Instead, we are almost perversely to honor and give hospitality to those who cannot possibly pay us back. This has immediate implications in terms of food, seating, and hospitality. In some ancient Christian churches, it was standard practice that if the church was full and a poor person came in, they were immediately given the bishop's chair, and he'd stand wherever he could. We in our own way continue this ancient practice at St. C's by using real plates and silverware when we host dinners for our guests in the PADS shelter program. It is one of the reasons why we break the rules of the Episcopal Church every week by inviting everyone to communion, whether they are baptized or not. Our holiest liturgical action has no barriers, no differences in status, just an open invitation that takes in the rich and the poor, the wicked and the righteous, the old and the young.

But table manners, even the table manners of the Eucharist and of God's kingdom, are never really just about how to eat. They are supposed to be reflections of what we value, trite little embodiments of a whole way of life, of who we are and what we believe. And what's behind the table manners of God is a life in which giving, sharing, and loving is completely unrelated to the personal payoff. Sure, it may come, but that is irrelevant to our motivation. With an assurance of an abundance of what really matters, we are free to give, to love, to share without barriers and without calculations of personal benefit.

The deeper, crazier claim of the Bible is that this is what reality is. The bones of this world are a place where the least, the ignored, the unfortunate, and the oppressed are the center of reality. From the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt, through a baby born in a manger in an obscure village, to refugees turned away and concentrated in camps today. This is the logic of God's world. And we are called in ways as small as dinner parties and as large as global politics to let this heartbeat of the world reverberate throughout our entire lives. Amen.