

Sermon – Place of Honor

Scripture Readings: Psalm 81:1, 10-16 and Luke 14:1, 7-14

Sunday, August 21, 2016

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Our first Scripture reading, Psalm chapter 81, verses 1 and 10-16, is a portion of a psalm in which God calls out to Israel, desiring their return to God's paths. Hear now God's holy Word.

*1 Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.*

*10 I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. 11 "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. 13 O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! 14 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes. 15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their doom would last forever. 16 I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." Amen.*

Our second Scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Luke 14:1, 7-14. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*1 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.*

*7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place," and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." This is the Word of the Lord.*

The title of the sermon: Place of Honor

The text: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Luke 14:13

Let us pray: Almighty God, you provide for the needy and care for the abandoned. Open our hearts in generosity and justice to the neglected and lonely, that in showing esteem for others, we may honor you. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

What's the most uncomfortable dinner party you've been to?

Apparently I've still got a lot of living to do, because I've been wracking my brain for a good personal story, and I've come up with nothing.

So bypassing my surprising lack of awkward dinner stories—I bet Jesus would have some amazing ones.

In fact, today's gospel reading is one such story.

Jesus has been invited to a Sabbath dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee.

Now, in today's world we have a lot of negative assumptions about the Pharisees—in fact, Pharisee is used as a synonym for “hypocrite”. Thanks to how the New Testament has been read and interpreted over the past two thousand years, we think of the Pharisees as the bad guys—tied to power, obsessed with law and purity, cruel and hidebound.

But as many contemporary scholars point out, including Dr. Amy Jill Levine, who will be speaking here on Thursday night, this was not the case at all.

Yes, the gospels record a great deal of tension between Jesus and the Pharisees—but that is because it was the Pharisees, among all the religious leaders and authorities, who were most like Jesus. They were thoughtful, respected, faithful teachers trying to figure out how to follow God during an incredible difficult time in Jewish life. They were concerned with the Roman occupation, and cared deeply for the ancient Jewish tradition of social justice and care for the poor. They were not leaders in the Temple, but rather were village-based, with limited power.

The rabbinic tradition that grew out of the tradition of the Pharisees saw great value in debate and difference, believing, not unlike our own Presbyterian tradition, that we get closest to discerning God's will when many different voices are a part of the conversation.

The Pharisees were the folk willing to eat with Jesus, willing to listen to his teachings and engage him in debate.

And yes, they had a great deal of conflict.

I'm reminded of a joke I heard Bill Moyers tell when he spoke at my college, about two men on a bridge. One is trying to convince the other not to jump, helping him find something to live for. Through a series of questions and answers, they discover they are both religious, both Christian, both Protestant, both Baptist. Getting more and more excited, they are feeling that God must have put them in each other's path. The man trying to help asks in delight "Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

The other replies, “Baptist Church of God!”

The first says "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" The other replies, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

"Me too! This is incredible! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"

And the first man says "Die, heretic scum" and pushes the second off the bridge.

We tend to have the greatest conflict with those who are closest to us. After all, don't we fight worse with our siblings than with anyone else?

So this story is less mortal enemies eating together, and more an incredibly uncomfortable family dinner.

Jesus has been preaching against the Pharisees and their teachings. The Pharisees have been trying to catch Jesus out in wrongdoing.

It's all pretty tense.

And the gospel doesn't hide this. Luke tells us that the Pharisees were watching him closely, which in the Greek has overtones of shadowing him, or standing right beside him to observe him. And Jesus is watching them right back, because upon seeing how the guests pick out their seats, Jesus begins to tell a parable.

And this parable, unlike all his others, is in the second person, directed straight at his listeners, and in the future tense, rather than the past, as if giving actual advice, rather than his usual storytelling style.

And this parable, told to guests choosing seats at a meal, is about how to choose your seat when you are a guest at a meal. It's more than a little pointed. Like I said—one tense dinner party.

And it is—to our ears—shockingly good social advice. Jesus, the man who is soon going to be advising his followers to hate their parents, seems to be channeling some sort of etiquette expert. What's going on here?

The world of Jesus' time was built on codes of honor and shame, and dinner parties were an incredibly important place within that system. The order of seating was deeply meaningful, and acquiring honor had a significant impact on your social standing and thus on your economic security well-being. Humility was not a virtue, for only the weak and those without honor would humble themselves.

Yet within that, there was still basic politeness, particularly within Jewish society. In fact, the Scriptural book Sirach (Sigh-wrack) advises something quite similar, about never taking the place of honor at a dinner party so that you might be moved further up the table rather than down.

And remember, Jesus' dining companions were Pharisees, faithful people well-versed in Scripture and good behavior. So likely he is watching them all do exactly that.

Yet his parable pushes it farther, taking this system of politeness to its extreme. He speaks of not just avoiding the place of honor, but of taking the lowest seat at the table.

And then he takes it even further. Turning to his host, he continues the parable, talking about how when throwing a dinner party, one shouldn't invite friends and family and wealthy or important

neighbors or community figures—as this host has—but rather, one should invite the poor, the blind, the sick, the destitute.

Jesus has gone from giving social advice to anti-social advice.

We do not live in a culture that acknowledges and relies up honor and shame in the same way as that of the Greco-Roman world in late antiquity.

Yet we have all networked. We have thrown dinner parties, or attended them with an eye to our professional or social advancement. We all know the importance of good connections. We all have spent time, consciously or not, cultivating our image and our connections, in person or on social media, so that we might benefit.

For this is good social advice, and even more than that, our image and our connections have a significant impact on our social standing, and thus on our personal economic security and well-being.

But Jesus tells us not to.

All of Jesus' parables speak in the third person—there once was a man, or a mustard seed, or a fig tree. His parables are stories, complex, rich, and full of imagery, offered so that we might learn something about the immensity and fullness of God.

Yet this parable is in the second person—when YOU are invited, when YOU give a dinner—and in the future.

Here, Jesus takes the fabric of our own lives, the simple and mundane experience of eating a meal, one which we have done and will do again, and turns it into a parable, one we cannot escape identifying with. When this happens to you, here is how you should act. Through his use of language he makes us, the listeners, the main characters, and thus we are irresistibly drawn in.

And yet it isn't just social advice, or anti-social advice. It is still a parable, and so it is both literal and metaphorical. We are invited to see our entire lived experience as a banquet, and to consider our role as both guest and host.

In the living of our lives, whom do we honor? What honor do we claim for ourselves? Whom do we place ourselves above?

Through this parable, Christ challenges the Pharisees to consider the ways they have lived, and to consider the ways they could live.

Remember how I talked so much about the Pharisees in the beginning? They aren't the bad guys—they are hard working, faithful folk trying to discern God's will in a confusing and complicated world.

They are us, here, right now. We are the Pharisees. We are hardworking, faithful people. We are the pastors and the people who show up to church week after week. We are the people reading Scripture and praying and trying so hard to figure out what God wants, and how God wants us to live.

And just like the Pharisees, just like the ancient Israelites, just like people of faith of every time and place, we get lost sometimes. We get caught up in our own counsels, and the counsels of society, and we lose God's voice in the noise.

But Christ calls us back. Christ reminds us that our strength is not in our social standing—in who comes to our dinner parties, or where we sit at the table—but that our strength is in God.

And so Jesus challenges us with this anti-social advice to forget our image, and to let go of good connections. Instead, we are called to embarrass ourselves in the eyes of the world and polite society.

(What else do you expect from a guy who makes an already awkward dinner party even more uncomfortable?)

We are called to invite into our lives not those who can repay us, but the homeless, the sick, the impoverished—those whose presence does not profit or advance us.

We are called to quiet down—to give the place of honor to someone else, so that rather than speaking for the voiceless, we give the voiceless space to speak for themselves.

We are called to honor Christ by honoring the least among us.

And this is hard, because the counsels of society give us no tools. Our culture gives us no path, and instead teaches us the opposite, and frowns upon such behavior.

And so we come together in worship, and turn to the gospel.

We are called by God to invite the homeless, the ignored, the dirty, the different into the feasts of our lives, opening our hearts as well as our tables to those who cannot repay us.

Consider the moments of your living each day. Who can you welcome into your life? What dinner party, literal or figurative, can you make uncomfortable through radical acts of hospitality? Where can you turn from what society expects, and toward the path of doing justice and loving kindness?

For this is not done for earthly reward, for networking or repayment or greater social standing.

We are called to this anti-social dinner party advice because this is the path to the abundance of new life. God calls us away from the counsels of society, for it is God who feeds us with finest wheat and honey from a rock, impossible and unexpected, and sustains us with more than good business connections and social media followers.

God is our strength and our joy, and this Christ who ate with us during his time on earth offers the promise of the resurrection, where death of every kind is not the last word, but where each person, no matter their social standing, will find abundant life and a place of honor at the banquet feast of God's kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.