

Luke 14: 1, 7-14 Table Talk

I wonder if you heard what I heard when I first read this pericope. Did you hear Jesus giving tips for behaving at a dinner party so as not to embarrass oneself? I heard him tell others “Don’t do that, you’d embarrass yourself. Do this instead, and you’ll come out better.” At first glance, Jesus’s advice, if that’s what it is, is a sort of strategy to come out looking good in front of everyone, and a passive-aggressive one at that, wouldn’t you say? Take the lowest place, so your host might come and raise you to a higher seat of honor. And Luke calls it a parable? What is really going on?

So, Jesus lived in a culture where the sense of honor and shame was the defining standard of one’s place and one’s value in the community, and nowhere else was this more carefully measured than at a gathering around a table where a meal was shared.

It was around the dinner table where the intellectuals and the people who were considered relevant and important were invited as honored guests to discuss ideas and share their wisdom. If the dinner was held on the sabbath, care was taken to keep the sabbath law by preparing the food in advance. Who ate What with Whom was very important for their sense of law and order, which to them was a way of honoring and loving God. You may recall, elsewhere in the Bible,

Jesus is criticized for breaking bread with the wrong kinds of people: sinners and tax collectors.

Last week, we saw how Jesus annoyed the synagogue leaders by healing a crippled woman on the sabbath. Those synagogue leaders were so focused on the “thou shall not work” part of the sabbath law, they failed to see Jesus had chosen the better way to observe the law by liberating the woman from her long years of ailment and thereby restoring her life. And that story ended with these words: “all his opponents were put to shame.”

In the Christian world, the Pharisees has gotten a bad rap as hypocrite, because they are often seen challenging Jesus, who has also accused them of being hypocrites, as some of them certainly were, but for the most part, the Pharisees were people eager to love and honor God by keeping the laws. The center of activities for the Pharisees were the synagogue, where they interpreted the laws to apply to specific situations. They were very much committed to keeping God’s law in every area, to the smallest details of life, because it was their way of expressing their devotion to God and recognizing God’s grace in all of life. This table fellowship and Sabbath observance were identification marks for a community struggling to maintain identity among many foreign and some hostile influences.

So, it's no wonder that everyone is watching Jesus very closely, at this dinner hosted by a leader of the Pharisees, on the sabbath. But it is Jesus who notices the behavior of the arriving guests. Eager to secure honor for themselves, the guests don't hesitate to occupy the places of honor. Seeing this ironically shameless behavior, Jesus tells a story, inviting them to imagine themselves at a wedding banquet, and how the host would move those who had prematurely and wrongly assumed themselves to be possessing of certain honor to their "rightful" place, the seats way down in the honor ranking, putting them to shame in the process. This host would then honor those who had humbly taken the lowest place and put them in their rightful place, in the place of honor.

And of course, a wedding banquet in a parable is a shorthand for the kingdom of God, the heavenly banquet, where God is the host. Jesus was not giving them a tip for social advancement after all but taking this material out of their real life to show them how things are with God.

Is this parable a lesson on humility? Perhaps, but not just any kind of humility. When one takes the lowest seat, that person is in effect saving all the "better seats" for others. Taking the lowest seat is not just an act of humility that is of self-abasing kind; rather, it is an

act of honoring others, by offering the place of honor to others; it is an active act of love.

The gift of the Spirit is more than self-directed humility, but mutual love that bestows honor on one another. We are called to honor one another. At a banquet where God is the host, God honors those who honor others, especially those whom the world has relegated to the place of shame.

Which brings us to the story Jesus then tells the host of the dinner who had invited him. Jesus says to the host, when you host luncheon or dinner, do not invite the people who have the means and resources to invite you back, as in “returning the favor.” Rather, Jesus suggests to the host that when he throws a banquet, (now it’s not just lunch or dinner, but a banquet) invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; in other words, the people the society in Jesus’s time shamed, and the people who were not able to “return the favor.” “Invite” not just “accept” or “tolerate,” which is an active honoring of the “least of these.” Jesus tells them, if you do this, then you will be paid at the resurrection of the righteous. Hear the echoes of Jesus’s earlier teaching?

Extending hospitality to someone who is not able to repay is to store the treasure in heaven. To sacrifice something of our own to affirm the value of those whom the world has devalued, is to be rich

toward God. What appears to be an obvious loss, judging by the way of the world, IS the treasure in heaven, because our God of grace and God of mercy treasures our acts of mercy.

While being closely watched by the Pharisees whose intentions were to recognize God's grace in every aspect of life, Jesus showed them what God's grace actually looked like, right there in the middle of their table fellowship, using the Table Talk. THIS was the wisdom Jesus came to share at the table fellowship at the house of a prominent Pharisees.

Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem: His teachings about table fellowship, on the sabbath, continue to sharpen the division, as they reveal the way of the kingdom of heaven that turn the carefully maintained system of their world upside down.

What would be an equivalent of the table fellowship in our culture today? What needs to be turned upside down in our way of bestowing honor to others? What humility do we practice that lifts others up? Or hospitality to those who are not able to repay?

Our world may not be exactly the "honor-shame" world Jesus lived in, but our culture, too, is rife with customs that serve the privileged at the cost of the underprivileged.

The culture in which I grew up was the post-war Japan where the economy was growing fast, and everyone was working hard to

rebuild the country. There were rich people I'm sure, but they weren't visible. There was a sense everyone belonged to perhaps a lower stratum of the middle class and was working hard to stay there.

And there developed a custom that every household seemed to follow, but my parents refused to practice. It was a tradition of sending gifts around a certain time of the year, actually twice a year, in winter and in summer, to people in your social circle as a token of gratitude for many favors they've done to you. It was supposedly a way of showing honor. But that's a formal reason on the surface, a pretense. In reality, people send gifts to those they considered were valuable and relevant, and if you receive a gift, it was imperative to send them one, too, to prove oneself worthy; not to do so was considered shameful. So, there's this circulation of gifts nationwide, twice a year, and the gifts tend to be nonperishables that any household would use, such as a couple of cans of vegetable oils, or a set of fancy bath towels.... very convenient for "re-gifting."

My parents noticed that it was functioning more as a way of proving one's financial ability, and hence one's respectability, that one could afford to participate in this gifting game, and one's honor depended on it. My parents felt it was a practice in "buying honor" rather than "bestowing honor" that put unnecessary burden on families who had real need, a better way to spend their money,

themselves included. So, they declared to their social circle that they would not be participating in this tradition; that's a scandalous thing to do in Japan that values harmony in social practice that made everyone feel sure in their place in the world. I don't know what social consequence they suffered, but I learned that my parents lived by the values they believed in, and it was always for empowerment of everyone. Japan as I knew it had lots of customs like that; they were fetters of obligation, often putting undue burden on those who "were not able to repay."

Compared to my experience in Japan, America seemed much freer and open, and hospitable... until I found myself raising my daughter in the affluent part of New York City inviting and being invited to kids' birthday parties. Where was it held, who were invited, and what kind of gifts did the parents buy from which schick boutique? Early on, kids were learning what "honor" looked like in their exclusive world, but they could have been the opportunities to show kindness, compassion, and generosity that could be freely given, because they were from God and did not come with a price tag. Which values was I teaching to my kid, I wonder.

The division Jesus said he's bringing to the earth, that's the result of our discernment whether to claim for ourselves the honor the world acknowledges, or to bestow honor to those the world neglects.

We live in a world far away in time and space from the one Jesus lived in, and we may not use the language of “honor” and “shame,” but we measure our value, our worth, in a similar way. We build our value, build our worth, according to what success means in this world. What matters in God’s kingdom is that we affirm one another’s worth and value, that we create space where others are valued, even if it means to give up our own space.

May we always remember Jesus’s Table Talk and may our actions, even here on earth, make God glad.