

Last week we had a farewell dinner for a clergy couple who are getting ready to move to the midwest. There were a few spouses, children, and other normal people there, but it was mostly pastors, so of course we referenced this passage and joked about who should get to sit where. Luke tells us that this reflection came from Jesus watching the behavior of real guests at an actual sabbath dinner, but Luke also calls Jesus' wisdom a parable. Like the stories of sowing seeds, lighting lamps, and searching for lost sheep, in this story about seats at a banquet table, Jesus teaches us more than just polite etiquette or appropriate table manners.

Our collective American mythology loves a good rags-to-riches story, and although we know that factors like educational opportunities and family resources make for a far-from-even playing field, we still enjoy more *potential* for social mobility than most people throughout history did. In Jesus' day, anyone who was doing any better economically than mere survival was keenly aware of just which rung of the social ladder they were clinging to so precariously. Nearly every public event provided a possible transaction of honor or shame, either helping propel someone upward or knocking them down. So the scene that unfolds in front of Jesus at the Pharisee's house is predictable: important people jockeying for a place at the table to advertise their social capital.

After watching how the guests arrange themselves, Jesus gives practical, maybe even cunning advice: it's better to take a modest place and get promoted than to presume you belong at the top and have the host embarrass you in front of everyone. Our modern idioms of *don't get too big for your britches* or *how far the mighty have fallen* would have applied equally to the social scene of Jesus' day. He sums up the lesson of his parable in verse 11: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted—except we don't see that second part happening so often. We are taught to get ahead by self-promotion; to get and protect what we think is owed to us. *Fortune favors the bold*, we are taught. But Jesus suggests that kingdom living follows a different set of rules.

If these dinner guests expect Jesus to share more strategy on social advancement, they are about to be sorely disappointed, because Jesus moves far beyond critiquing their capricious social scene to revealing God's radical vision for human community. *When you host a meal, don't invite your friends, your family, or your rich neighbors who will one day return the favor.*

*Instead invite those who are less fortunate, even though you know they won't be able to pay you back.* For people who are used to exploiting every social interaction as a potential springboard to a more successful place in their community, Jesus' message must have sounded like complete nonsense. If the whole point of hosting a dinner is to see and be seen by the upwardly mobile, why would you invite people who were never going anywhere?

But *is* that the whole point of a meal? Isn't a meal really for eating, for no longer being hungry? Shouldn't a banquet be for everyone to eat? And how much more so for those who were probably not used to being invited to dinner, who might have been accustomed to going hungry? According to kingdom values, God doesn't give us resources so we can show off how important we are; God gives us resources, such as a banquet of food, because we—and others—are hungry and need to eat. The most Christ-like thing to do with the resources we have is to step back and make sure that others get what they need; showing off what we have while others go hungry is the opposite of Jesus' self-sacrificial service.

I haven't figured out who said it first, but a popular bit of wisdom making the rounds these days is that "What is wrong with the world today is that we have forgotten that we are supposed to love people and use things; instead we end up loving things and using people." I'm not sure when that idea was first articulated that way, but it sounds like Jesus' contemporaries were struggling with essentially the same problem: seeing other people as a means to their own self-promotion instead of seeing other people as co-creations of the Divine, made in God's image and therefore worthy of the same love that we show ourselves.

The gospels, and maybe Luke's gospel most of all, teach us that Jesus' way of looking at the world runs counter to the way human beings are pre-disposed to look at the world. Where we see scarcity, Jesus sees abundance. Where we see a need for competition, Jesus invites cooperation. Where we try to figure out how well we measure up, Jesus loves each of us just as much as every other. There are no places of greater honor at God's table; if we presume to take such a seat, we may find out the hard way that we don't deserve any better place than anyone else. If we sit in the last, least, and lowest spot, we'll find out we're loved just as much as those whom we were certain belong before us. And because we are called to follow God's way, we are instructed to set a table to share what we've been given, not to use other people to get more for ourselves. Does Jesus' way make sense? Of course not. We'll always be frustrated if we try to make Jesus fit our methods. Jesus showed us a better way: may God help us follow it.