

SERMON September 1, 2013

[Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14]
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PRAYER: Send out your light and your truth, O Lord; let them lead us; let them bring us to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Amen.

INTRODUCTION: In the summer of 1970, I was in a small town near Stuttgart, Germany, learning the German language at the Goethe Institut. As part of the cost of this language institute, we were given a packet of tickets which could be redeemed for meals at several of the local restaurants. One of the most important things we learned about these local eating places was that each little restaurant had a **Stammtisch**. A *Stammtisch* is a special table reserved for the family of the owner and for regular customers. All the locals know this, of course, and so, they do **not** sit at the *Stammtisch*, unless they have been **invited** to do so. And, if you, as a stranger, should happen to sit at the *Stammtisch* **without** being invited by the owner of the restaurant, well, you would commit a great **faux pas** and most people in the restaurant would know it, too! I thought of this little cross-cultural experience as I pondered our Gospel lesson for today, for **it, too**, has to do with **table manners**: with eating, with the seating arrangement of hosts and guests, and with taking one's rightful place at the table. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is giving pointed lessons in **humility**, something that should characterize every Christian behavior.

It will help us to grasp the meaning of Jesus' teaching on humility if we give some attention to the **details** of Luke's narrative. Like the Gospel readings during the past few Sundays, our lesson is found in the context of Luke's so-called "Travel Narrative". This narrative recounts Jesus' journey from **Galilee**, which was the locus of most of his ministry, to **Jerusalem**, where he was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem takes up only a **chapter** or so in Matthew and Mark; but in Luke, this journey takes up almost **nine** long chapters. Luke's huge expansion suggests that he uses this "Travel Narrative" as a **literary device** to emphasize what he sees as important. Into it, he puts Jesus' important final teachings, including this lesson on humility, which is **unique** to Luke's Gospel. Luke's intent is to teach his audience, including us, what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus.

Luke sets the scene for Jesus' teaching on humility in verse 1 of our gospel lesson: "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." "They were watching him closely" so they could catch him in some kind of behavior or teaching contrary to the Law of Moses in order to **discredit** him with the people. So, they were watching Jesus. But, Jesus is **also** watching them closely (!) for he comments on the behavior both of the guests and of his host.

"When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. '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 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. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest

place, so that when you host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.”

Now, perhaps you know that seating arrangements at such meals in the time of Jesus were extremely **important**. They involved elaborate **maps** of persons with roles clearly specified for all: a host, a chief guest, and other guests. The places taken at the table reflect the **status** of each person, with the chief guest closest to the host and the other guests arranged in some declining order of status. The most important guests—those who are distinguished because of their **age** or **social standing**—usually arrive **last**. If one of their seats of honor is already taken, then the offending person would be obliged to take the **lowest** place, since all the **intermediate** places would already be occupied. And so the not-so-humble guest would be **humbled** by the host!

If, on the other hand, the invited guest chooses a lower seat at the banquet table and later is called up higher by the host, then “[he] will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with [him].” (v. 10) Honor from your peers, Jesus says, comes **not** from your own self-seeking choice, but from the estimate **others** have of you.

But **then** Jesus introduces a **further dimension** by adding the proverbial statement found in verse 11: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” There are many examples of this proverb in ancient literature and it would have been **familiar** to Jesus’ hearers. In fact, we heard it in a slightly different form in the reading from **Proverbs** this morning. Now, it is important to note that the form of this proverb is in the **passive voice**—“will be humbled” and “will be exalted”—i.e., not by one’s own action, but by the action of someone else. Jesus’ hearers would have understood this someone else to be **God**. Pious Jews avoided saying God’s name directly and instead employed the passive voice, as here, in order to suggest God’s activity. So, it is **God’s judgment**, Jesus says, that is the source of **true honor**. We encounter this judgment over and over in Scripture, including in the Magnificat of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Wherever this judgment appears, it enunciates the **Great Reversal** of human values God demands and Jesus taught—a reversal of status, condition, or role: when the **mighty** are brought **low** and the **lowly** are **raised** up; when the **rich** are sent away **empty** and the **hungry** are **filled** with good things; when God overthrows the **powerful** and puts the **powerless** in their place.

This ancient proverb, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”, **links** Jesus’ address to the self-seeking guests directly to Jesus’ address to his host: Jesus makes the **same point** to **both**. In Jesus’ address to his host, it is **not** self-seeking **ambition** that is the problem, but rather self-seeking **payback**—looking for **reward**.

“[Jesus] said also to the [host] 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’” (14:12-14)

We understand the point here, don’t we? People basically eat with others who share their values. But Jesus urges them to invite those who are **not** like themselves: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Inviting such

persons will show the host's **true motive** for the invitation, because the disadvantages of these guests mean they **cannot repay** the favor.

And you notice the same use of the **passive** voice at the end of this section: "You **will be blessed**, because they cannot repay you, for you **will be repaid** at the resurrection of the righteous." (v. 14) Since **they** cannot repay, **God** will make the reward, even if that reward does not come until the end of time—"the resurrection of the righteous."

Now, clearly, both Jesus and Luke are interested in **much more** than proper table manners. Perhaps you are recalling other experiences with self-seeking that **you** have had. You may even be asking yourself, as I have asked **myself**, What **does** motivate my actions and my invitations? Where **do** I look for honor and reward? If you, too are thinking this way, you have already moved on to the "**So what?**" question I want to consider now. Let me suggest **two** things that occur to me.

First, Jesus calls for humility in **every area** of life, not just dinner invitations or seating arrangements. Proper behavior at a banquet and the character of dinner invitations are **analogies** to the attitude and every kind of behavior demanded of those who follow Jesus—those who are **living into** the Reign of God: **not** self-seeking **ambition** and **not** seeking for **reward**, but, rather, the humility that arises from **self-giving love**. In fact, it is the "**mutual love**" urged in our lesson from **Hebrews** this morning. **Love** is the **antidote** to all self-centeredness and is the **ground** of humility. Love is never self-seeking. Love never reckons with reward!

Teresa and I have just been witness to a profound **example** of the **humility** that Jesus commends and the **love** that is its heart. Recently, our good friend, **Janet Lower**, a woman in her early 50s, with no medical problems known to us, suddenly died. In continuing shock and sadness, her friends gathered for her memorial service at University Methodist Temple in Seattle. We were amazed to see this huge sanctuary, which seats several hundred people, filled with those whose lives Janet had touched. Teresa and I have experienced Janet's loving kindness **many** times, including helping us move to Whidbey Island. And we heard testimony after testimony to the many **servant roles** she had filled in her church and to the many, **many other** persons who were the beneficiaries of her love and concern. We were astonished at the huge amount of good she was doing as she gave generously and unconditionally of her love to others. And her **humility** in all of this was **underscored** by the fact that most of us **did not know** how much she had given to all the **others**. After the service, I spoke to her father and remarked all the good she had done and he said to me, "We **had no idea** she did all this." Obviously, Janet was living the life of humility commended by our Lord, humility that is the by-product of **self-giving love**: doing good in the here and now without looking for reward.

The **second** point I have already hinted at: when Jesus says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"; when Jesus says, "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous", he is pointing to the **Last Day**, at the end of time, when the **Great Reversal** of human values will be **fully realized**. Jesus is pointing to that great **Messianic Banquet** to which all are invited to sit down with each other and with Jesus at **God's** banquet table. The seating arrangement will be set by God and the seating arrangement will confirm the **Great Reversal** of human values **lived**

and **taught** by Jesus, who **humbled** himself even to giving up his life and was **exalted** by God to God's right hand!

In the **meantime**, and as a **foretaste** of that future heavenly banquet, we have a banquet table **set here** this morning, a table where **Jesus** is both the **host** and the **holy food**. This is **Jesus' *Stammtisch***, if you will, and, as his **friends**, we are all **welcome** at this table. True to his own teaching, Jesus invites **all** of us to this banquet—**each one** of us who **cannot repay** him: we who, apart from him, know ourselves to be the poor, the crippled, the lame, and those who do not see. There is **no preferred status** here around this table: **whoever** you are and **wherever** you are on the journey of faith, you are **welcome** at this *Stammtisch*!

AMEN