

28 August 2022

Jeremiah 2:4-13  
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

I like this little story: it is so vivid, and it captures my imagination!

Picture the scene. Jesus has been invited to eat in the house of a noted Pharisee. It is most likely that the other guests are Pharisees too, and have been invited to join this prominent leader in their sect for a meal on the Sabbath. Perhaps they have all just been to the synagogue together. The seating arrangement is probably of cushions on the floor or low couches arranged in a U shape around a low table. After the customary hand-washing, the guests would recline on the cushions or couches, leaning on their left elbow to leave their right hand free for eating. The host would recline at the base of the U. The most honoured guests would be arrayed next to him, on his left and right. Here is an opportunity to be seen to be an important person in this community: the closer to the host, the more important you are. If you are given or secure a place next to the host, you'll be the talk of the town all week.<sup>1</sup>

Luke doesn't elaborate on the details of the scene, but remarks merely that Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table. I wonder what details lay behind that very spare reporting.

Was it all very dignified: someone of lower status taking the best place, and someone else responding with a glare, followed by a tight-lipped smile to the host? Was there an undignified hurry; a flurry of robes as someone rushed to take his seat; or someone washing his hands quickly looking over his shoulder lest his place be taken in the meantime? Was something said; a complaint made to the host? Was there a bit of jostling for position, elbows jabbing, a shove, a fend, a tripping up?

In any case, Jesus is moved to give a little teaching to the assembled company. It could almost have come from one of the columns of Judith Martin, writing as Miss Manners:

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, *Word*, 81

Miss Manners hopes that when one is invited to a dinner party, one is careful to avoid the appearance of being overweening, thrusting or conceited. One should not choose the place of honour, but rather the lesser place.

Or, in the words of Jesus:

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, ... take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

I am reminded of a story:

After everyone was seated at an ambassadorial banquet, one of the lady guests complained rather too loudly that, according to the official order of precedence, she ought to be seated next to the host. She was found to be right, and several of the other guests were forced to move down to make room for her next to the ambassador.

Slightly abashed at the fuss she had caused, the lady said to the ambassador: "You and your wife must find these questions of precedence extremely troublesome."

"Not really," her host replied, "we have found by experience that the people who matter don't mind and the people who mind don't matter."<sup>2</sup>

Or, as Jesus put it: 'Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Jesus then has a point to make to the host, for he detects a similar issue going on with him:

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the

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<sup>2</sup> Gyles Brandreth, *871 Famous Last Words*, Sterling Publishing, 1979, p.105

poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

You see, while the guests at the Pharisee's home were concerned for their sense of honour or self-importance, so too was the Pharisee. He has chosen his guests and chosen this act of so-called hospitality as a way of showing off his status and power, to engage in political back-scratching. Higher society in those days, drawing on the patterns of Rome, revolved around the system of patronage, a carefully calculated set of interactions and relationships, in which hospitality was treated as investment or currency, and where a host earned credit and a guest was placed in his debt. The cultural expectations may have changed, but in our day we too likely have our own systems and biases which mean that certain types of people would not find welcome in our own settings.<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus counsels a completely different approach, an approach that does not involve these kinds of calculations. Invite those who cannot return the favour; invite the powerless; invite those in need.

Here we have gone beyond Miss Manners to something more like Mother Theresa.

*Genuine* hospitality is concerned for the needs of the other, for the guest; not for the needs of the host. It is giving without expectation of getting something in return. It is an expression of *agape*, the kind of self-less, self-giving love that characterised Christ.

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Now while this is all good and sound ethical teaching, I want to look beyond the immediate issues.

Jesus didn't actually come to teach us good manners and social responsibility as such.

It would be more correct, a more complete explanation, to start with the observation that the root of this concern for humility and self-giving comes from the fact that we

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<sup>3</sup> See Moore, "Be Present"

are ourselves recipients of unmerited grace from God. God invites us – unworthy and unlovely though we are – to dine and dwell with him. It is through Christ’s representative death on the cross that God justifies us, entering a verdict of “not guilty” despite the facts that demand a guilty verdict. And as a result we are received into the family of God. If we have been so invited to the heavenly banquet, how much more then should humbly give and receive hospitality in this world.

And this hints at the next point. This passage points towards the end of the present age, to the coming of the reign of God in all its fullness. The pointers are there when Jesus says “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” he is talking of one of the features of the end of the age: the reversal of worldly fortunes that comes when God’s reign is complete. We find this theme of eschatological reversal elsewhere in the Bible:

- In Ezekiel 17, God says “All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”
- In Luke 1, as Mary the expectant mother of Jesus sings her praise of God, she sings “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”
- We see it the Beatitudes in Luke 6: “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”  
And in the parallel woes in the same chapter, “Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.”

In the kingdom of God, human valuations are turned on their heads – the valuations are actually turned right way up. God elevates the weak and powerless, and casts down those who have clambered over them to the top. Jesus seems to be suggesting to his distinguished audience that they have no idea at all of the criteria God is using to send out his invitations. No amount of working your way up the religious or social hierarchical ladder is going to guarantee admission, and if you do get invited, you may find yourself in some very strange company, Jesus implies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Reflections*, 105

But we must always be careful that we don't trade one ideology that diminishes the humanity of others for another. The ambassador's reply "those who mind don't matter" may be a clever put-down of the overbearing woman at the banquet, but it is not the way of God: with God "those who mind" still matter, but not in the way or for the reason they thought they did. While God's realm is not built on displays of wealth, prestige, or political influence, neither is it built on displays of poverty, humility or powerlessness – for it is not built on *displays* of any kind.<sup>5</sup>

Just as mention of the exaltation of the humble is a sign that Jesus is talking about the end of the age, so too when Jesus says "you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" he is also talking about that time when all the faithful will be raised to new life, living in the new redeemed creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

How we behave *now* is relevant to that future.

But it is important to be clear about *in what way* our behaviour now is relevant to that future. It is not the case that the Bible is a book of rules and ethical injunctions which, if we follow them, will lead us to life in the kingdom. Through Christ, God has *already* declared his not-guilty verdict.

But how we behave now is important as we begin to live out the implications of our status as the redeemed people of God, and live with one another in ways that are increasingly consistent with the ways of the kingdom.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit, and of one another here, as our transformation is not complete, and won't be so until we find ourselves in the coming new creation.

In his book on Justification, Bishop Tom Wright puts it this way:

[Good works] will involve Christians behaving according to radically different standards to the world, but the point of this is not simply 'because you now need to be virtuous' but 'because the church is the body of Christ in and for the world'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This point prompted by Sharp, "Commentary"

<sup>6</sup> p. 147

Note that he says “the church is the body of Christ ... *for the world*” as well as “in the world”. Trying to live in the ways of the kingdom now is part of our participation in transforming the world, as the kingdom of God becomes more and more present.

Jesus teaches us to be humble, to look out for others, particularly those who are weak and downtrodden, the apparently undeserving. This comes out of the fact that we ourselves have been the recipients of the unmerited grace of God. Living in this way anticipates the sort of reversal that is expected at the end of the age when the reign of God is universal, and it helps to reveal and make God’s reign active in the world today as we wait for the coming of Christ.

One Sabbath Jesus went to dine at the home of a prominent Pharisee. Observing how the guests vied for places of honour at the table he remarked, “It won’t be like this in the new creation, you know, when God’s reign is fully established. So why don’t you get used to the idea, and start making it real today!”

Amen.

#### Sources

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