

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 22 (C)
August 28, 2022
Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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This week I listened to the story of a woman who lives with a significant physical disability. She told about the experience of going to a doctor's appointment, accompanied by her non-disabled daughter. The woman described how the nurse practitioner spoke to her daughter, addressed questions to the daughter, and never really looked at the woman herself, even though the appointment was for her. She said she felt completely invisible, like she didn't matter at all.

Disability provides just one example of how our culture treats some people as valuable and others as disposable. It's as if we've been trained to believe there is a hierarchy of human value and deserving. That hierarchy is defined by your race and gender, by how physically attractive you are, how much money you have, by your status or popularity or how you promote yourself. For this reason, most people seem to act as though life were a big competition to get more—more money, more popularity, more beauty or status, more success and more opportunities for their children to succeed. In practice, this means that people end up with very different prospects in life depending on the color of their skin, or whether they live with some sort of disability, or what sort of educational opportunities they had growing up. If life was a baseball game, then some people are, practically speaking, born on third base, while others are never even given a chance to step up to the plate.

In the newspaper recently there was a series of articles about people who've achieved some sort of fame, what they'd done to get it and how having it had affected their lives. It was pretty amazing what people would do in pursuit of fame. They did things that got them arrested, or put their life in danger. It tells me that however different our modern, technological world is from the traditional agrarian society Jesus lived in, people continue to be very much the same, driven by the same kinds of desires and fears.

Our Gospel story tells about how people were scrambling for the VIP seats at a dinner party. It sounds a bit like the scramble for the top college or the top earning job, to be recognized as the best, whether for oneself or one's children. It sounds sort of like the scramble for popularity, whether on social media or in real life, or the drive to be perceived as cool, whether with clothes or tattoos or possessions or experiences. Then and now, people try to distinguish themselves as more important than others—more valuable and more deserving of love and respect. And that is what Jesus is speaking to in our reading for today.

At first glance, when Jesus suggests seeking the lowest seat when you are invited to a big event, it sounds like a cunning plan. If blatant grabbing for status and recognition risks failure, then use a little reverse psychology to secure greater honor and avoid public

humiliation. But notice how our gospel writer describes the scene. Jesus saw the guests scrambling for places of honor, so he told them a *parable*. And we know what that means. Jesus isn't doling out helpful advice for getting ahead in the world. Instead, he's messing with how we think, what we value, and how we will live. Jesus wants us to reevaluate things we thought we knew. He wants to put us in touch with the ways of God so that we can be transformed. And perhaps we can imagine that transformation like this: it involves diagnosing our human disease and touching us with God's power for healing.

Jesus wants us to see how desperately sick the human family is, sick with attitudes and ways of living that create so much conflict and pain and suffering. Those attitudes and ways of living include desire and entitlement and hierarchy, and they are poisoning us and poisoning our relationships with each other and the earth. Desire is probably as normal as breathing. We all desire love and respect. We all desire to have a nice life. But desire doesn't include a sense of enough and it doesn't recognize that my desire for love and respect is no different, and no more deserving, than anyone else's. So desire always seeks more, and feels entitled to more, and sets us up to imagine that not only our desires, but our selves, are more important and more deserving than others. And that leads to competition and conflict and violence and hierarchy and the divide between rich and poor. We end up living in a society that regards some people as more deserving of love and respect than others. It treats some people as valuable and others as disposable. Jesus wants to realize that this "normal state of affairs" is contrary to everything God wants for us. It is so inhuman, so cruel and self-serving and the source of so much suffering.

If desire and entitlement and hierarchy are the disease, then the antidote Jesus offers is humility. Humility is part of a genuinely human life, and essential for living with a sense of peace. It helps open our eyes to gratitude, to receive the blessings of life that God gives. Humility helps us live with contentment in the present, rather than being bothered by resentment about something in the past, or fear about something in the future. Humility is beautiful and life-giving. Sadly, in our arrogant and self-promoting culture, there are a lot of misleading and unhelpful caricatures of humility. Humility doesn't mean seeing ourselves as insignificant, or acting like a doormat for other people to walk on. Humility doesn't mean pretending we are less competent or capable than we really are. Instead, humility is freedom from entitlement and arrogance and self-serving. Humility recognizes that none of us has all the answers. No one is infallibly correct. And even more than that, humility means recognizing that no person is more or less deserving of love and respect than anyone else. None of us are more entitled to get what we desire than anyone else. Humility is a way of looking at ourselves and the rest of the human family with the conviction that there is no hierarchy of more deserving people and less deserving people. There is an amazing kind of clarity and freedom in knowing that nobody is more important than me, but also that I am not more important than anyone else.

Beloved children of God, this week you may not have the opportunity to attend a dinner party where you can resist scrambling for the VIP seats. But I don't doubt that you will have the opportunity to wrestle with what our culture tells you you're entitled to. You'll

probably have the chance to reflect on what you need, and how much is enough. You might conclude that you have more than enough, and consider how your abundance might be a blessing to someone else. I wonder if you'll catch yourself tempted to act as though some people really are more important than other people. I wonder how you might be able to practice the beautiful posture of humility in a way that gives you a sense of clarity and freedom. I'm confident of this: that God's Spirit is already at work in your life to nurture such a deep confidence in God's love for you that it sets you free from the need to scramble for anything, so you can be fully available to represent Jesus' beautiful, life-giving way in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.