

Sermon-8/29/10 Newport Pres. Church  
"Humility"  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

The Talmud is a Jewish commentary on the Torah. It has some wonderful stories. One of them concerns a rabbi. One day a man heard some celebrating going on at the rabbi's house. He knew it was not time for a special holiday. There had been no wedding. So he asked the rabbi why he was celebrating. The rabbi told him this story.

He said he was approached by a woman in the town. She begged him to come and help her daughter who was sick. The rabbi said he had a very important meeting and would come later when he could get away. When he finally did arrive at the woman's house, he was shocked to see that the daughter had died. He felt terrible.

That night he tossed and turned. Finally he prayed to God that if God would allow him to resurrect the daughter from the dead, God could erase his name out of the Book. God granted him that wish. Sure enough the next day he resurrected the daughter from the dead.

The visitor was very surprised. Your name has been erased from the Book and you are celebrating? Why would you want to do that? The rabbi said, "I am celebrating my freedom. For the first time in my life, I can serve God not for the sake of any rewards but for the sake of my love for God."

That Jewish story seems to cut right to the heart of our Christian gospel lesson for today. It captures the essence of what Jesus was trying to teach those with whom he was eating dinner. He had been invited by the Pharisee to a meal. Luke says the Pharisees were watching him closely. Was this a trap? Was there tension around the table between Jesus and the Pharisees? I don't think we have to assume that. Apparently some Pharisees were intrigued by Jesus and even liked him. We know some tried to help him escape from Herod.

We know, as well, by what follows that the Pharisees were not the only ones doing some careful watching. Jesus, too, was a great observer of human behavior. He noticed how the guests, when they arrived, tried to sit in the seats of greatest honor around the table. Here are these elite religious leaders playing a game of social one-upmanship. I suspect Jesus was amused as well as disgusted by this. So he tells them a parable.

We have to remember what follows is a parable. It sounds like Jesus is giving advice about proper seating arrangements at a dinner party. We make a mistake, however, if we reduce Jesus to being an ancient version of Emily Post. We need to remember Luke tells us this was a parable. That means we need not take what Jesus says literally. Instead we need to see what the point of the parable might be.

The issue for Jesus is humility versus our having too high an estimation of ourselves. He was upset watching those at the dinner working so hard to prove their self-worth among their peers. It is a parable showing the absurdity of any arrogant behavior.

While most of us do not like to see ourselves as arrogant, we can see examples of arrogance in society and even in our religion. We may even be guilty of arrogant thinking ourselves and not even know it. Certainly arrogance has run amok in our modern American culture.

The examples of this are almost too obvious to list. When we think we are right and the other so wrong we can't learn a thing from them, then arrogance is in play. When politicians think their agenda is more important than the common good, making compromise impossible, arrogance is revealed. This arrogance leads to distorting the facts when arguing one's point. It certainly does not promote public discourse that will lead to healthy communities.

When we see this kind of arrogance on display, people wrapped up in their own self-importance, especially among our politicians in an election year, I am reminded of a Ben Franklin quote I found. He said, "A man wrapped up in himself is the smallest package in the world." Amen to that.

It is easy to point our finger at politicians. We may need to look closer to home. Those who have deep religious convictions are constantly in danger of arrogance. This is most obvious when we look at those in a different religious tradition than our own. Certainly those radical Islamist display an incredible arrogance in thinking those of us who practice another religion are infidels worthy of being killed.

But, before we get too self-righteous, Christians have also been very arrogant. Those Christians who claim the only access to God is through Jesus and all other religions are wrong often fail to see the arrogance behind such a stance. Who are we to make such a statement? When we point to certain scriptures in our sacred text, the Bible, to justify such a stance, we fail to see the circularity of that argument.

I realize what I am about to say is a controversial subject, so I will only raise a little question. One of the editorials in the Seattle Times helped me see this. The writer says suppose a Christian Church wanted to build a community center two blocks from the site of the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. And then others said it was an outrage because the one who bombed that building was a Christian and the church was desecrating holy ground. How would Christians feel about that?

She raised this question in discussing what is going on in New York City these days. Could arrogance be involved when some Christians feel outrage at the Islamic Center in New York being built near Ground Zero because those involved in that terrorist act were Muslims? Can we put ourselves in the shoes of moderate Muslims who find such a position hurtful?

Arrogance can lead to religious prejudices that lead to distrust and fear of the other. I have said this over and over again in sermons, but it bears repeating. God is bigger than any religion. It is not up to us to think we deserve the best seat at the banquet table in God's kingdom. Only God is in charge of the seating chart. We need the humility to recognize who sits where at God's table is not our job.

Jesus pushes this a bit further in his comments to his host at the dinner. He tells him one should not invite only his friends to a dinner party. Those friends can pay him back with an invitation of their own. Those kinds of invitations end up being very self-serving. Since I invited you to dinner, I deserve to be invited in return.

Instead, Jesus says he is to invite the poor, the crippled, and the lame. They can't possibly return the favor. If that is taken literally it could come across as very paternalistic. Only invite those who can't pay you back so you can feel so righteous and good about yourself. That is hardly Jesus' point.

Remember the issue here is God and God's kingdom. In God's kingdom we need to realize we are all poor beggars. Not one of us can pay God back for the grace that has been shown us. We are all in debt to a love that is far bigger than we can muster in ourselves. We are children at God's table. Not one of us deserves to be there more than anyone else. To think God loves us better because of any status whether that be wealth, gender, or religious affiliation is very troublesome.

As one commentator has noted, we get our value as people from the fact that we are a creation of God. We are all children of God. God loves us all equally. When we disconnect our lives from living out of that perspective we either undervalue our worth or inflate our worth. Both of those stances lead to poor behavior, prejudice and sometimes violence.

Another scholar says we are to live a life "grounded in the knowledge that all have equal access to God's table." By all, we need to see that means **all**. None of us deserve access more than others.

When we truly live into that kind of life, we can begin to see the freedom about which the rabbi in the Talmud story is talking. We care for others not to earn brownie points with God. We don't worry about believing all the right things in order to have a better seat at the table in God's kingdom. We are just so grateful for the grace God has shown us that we respond in humble gratitude. We don't think too highly of ourselves, nor do we have poor self-esteem. We are all children of God with enormous worth in God's eyes. That fact trumps everything else. That is the good news we celebrate each Sunday. Amen