

Pentecost 15C (8/28/2016)

Proverbs 25:6-7

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Deliberately or not, we are constantly evaluating ourselves against others. If our value is determined by our place in a perceived pecking order, then the world necessarily has winners and losers. But, if our value is determined by the love of God, then we are no longer subject to a system of comparative social evaluation in the first place. Instead, we are free to love generously and without concern for what sets us apart from others.

Today's Gospel sounds a little like an advice column in the newspaper.

Dear Jesus: I'm getting ready to attend a friend's wedding, and I'm struggling with a dilemma. The couple has not assigned seats at the reception, and I won't know anyone else there, so I'm not sure where I should sit. For now, I'm planning to sit near the head table in hopes of being perceived as a close friend of the couple. That way, I'll look good in front of the other guests. What do you think? Thanks in advance for your help. Signed: Socially Anxious in Ancient Palestine.

Dear Socially Anxious: 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 your host comes,

he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. Have fun! Signed: Jesus.

Isn't it refreshing to come across a Gospel with such a simple teaching? It's just good advice: *When you go to a dinner party, don't embarrass yourself by presuming to sit in a place of privilege and then being asked to move. Instead, wait to be called up to the appropriate place. You might be pleasantly surprised at how highly your host thinks of you!*

Wow, thanks for the astute suggestion, Jesus. I'll be sure to play my cards right the next time.

Oh, and one more thing: when you throw a dinner party, don't invite your friends or family at all, but instead invite the people everyone would least expect to see at your table, you know, the outcasts and the losers.

Um, ok, I was with you up to that last part, Jesus, but now I'm not so sure I understand. How does *that* help my reputation?

I trust that you sense my facetious tone. At first, this passage from Luke may sound like a simple lesson in social etiquette, a strategy for achieving the best possible outcome at dinner parties. But, we don't have to look much closer to see that Jesus is up to something bigger. **In the presence of a host who epitomizes status in a highly stratified society, Jesus upholds a radically different view of the world, a divine perspective that overturns the way we typically assign value. In the context of competition for social**

esteem, he casts a vision of the realm of God, a life-giving alternative to the hierarchy we establish for ourselves.¹

Keep in mind that the scene is set at a meal with a religious official and his friends, individuals who enjoy high social standing, and who guard that standing carefully. Only the “right” people are invited to the meal, those who boost or at least preserve the status of the host and the other guests. So, it’s no wonder that they are “watching Jesus closely.” He’s a wild card, a drifter of uncertain origins, yet who commands a great deal of respect from the people.²

What are they to make of Jesus, this circle of insiders, and what does his strange teaching mean? “When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place... [and] when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” – “...those who humble themselves will be exalted.” **In a society marked by hierarchy, it simply would never occur to the guests at an upscale dinner to approach the table with humility, that is, to intentionally underestimate their social esteem. Neither would it occur to the host to invite anyone of low status, anyone who could not measure up.** So, Jesus’ teaching would sound foreign, even offensive.

Of course, our world is not far removed from theirs, and if we take an honest look, we see ourselves in the Pharisee and his dinner guests. We also order our world according to status. Deliberately or not, we are constantly

¹ See Emilie M. Townes, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 22.

² See 13:17.

evaluating ourselves against others, quick to judge who is and who is not worthy of our regard. **My social standing depends on my proximity to the “right” people – those with a minimum level of education, popularity, professional success, decency, morality – as well as the distance I put between myself and the “wrong” people – “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” so to speak, that is, the outcasts and losers, those of little worth in our eyes.** Such distinctions often extend to entire communities, as residents aim to preserve a veneer of respectability by guarding against unwanted others. “Clean Up Puyallup” is a prime example.

But, if our value is determined by our place in a perceived pecking order, then the world will necessarily have winners and losers. “The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” will remain on the margin so long as we rely on their exclusion for our own sense of self-worth. And, those at the center will never be rid of the urge to defend their own status, forever tied to the social ladder they are so anxiously climbing.

If, on the other hand, our value is determined by the love of God – a love that confers upon each and every one of us a fundamental dignity – then we are no longer subject to a system of comparative social evaluation in the first place. We are no longer slaves to the ego. When Jesus advises his listeners to approach other guests at a feast with humility, and to invite the vulnerable and the outsiders to the table, he refuses to play

into the matrix of social competition that is so widespread in his world and in ours. **He confronts our propensity to jockey for position and insists upon a world where no one is excluded from the table** – a world where we “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves,” where we “look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.”³

Jesus is himself the exemplar of this way of life, embodying God’s humble, transformative love – the kind of love that makes its way to the margin where the pain and shame and loneliness are the worst. Ladder climbers wouldn’t be caught dead there, but Jesus is already there, inviting us into a new reality, an inverted social order where the humble are worthy of the highest honor. There, we no longer have the need to prove ourselves to the world, but we are free to love like he does, generously and without concern for what sets us apart from others.

³ Philippians 2:3-4.