

Sermon – August 28, 2022

“Humility”

Text: Luke 14: 7-14

I can't believe Jesus was invited to dinner! Wasn't it just last Sunday that he was ridiculed for healing a bent over woman on the Sabbath, to the horror of the religious leaders? And didn't Jesus alarm his listeners two Sundays ago that he was bringing discord and disturbance, not peace among the people? Who would even bother inviting someone like him – branded as a troublemaker – one who cannot control his tongue, to speak truth to power? Believe it or not, Jesus had been invited to a Sabbath dinner despite his unpleasant encounters with the religious and political leaders! I think his reputation as a rabbi earned him a seat at the table!

Sabbath dinners were of the utmost importance to the ancient Jews, for they were signs of acceptance and social standing. At those dinners, esteemed guests were invited, tables were spread with fine food, and places of honour were assigned. The most coveted seats were those on the right or the left-hand side of the host. At that particular dinner in Luke, the leading citizens, perhaps of the entire Jerusalem, were invited. The intellectuals. The politicians. The high priests. The affluent. Members of the Sanhedrin. One particular group would be the Pharisees. The Pharisees were both a political party and a religious group that insisted on the strict observance of Jewish law. The host was a noted Pharisee in Jerusalem. The noble ladies came to dinner with their gold necklaces and their strings of pearls draped around their colourful expensive evening gowns. The men also looked very regal in their purpled linens, with their gold rings displayed prominently on their fingers. There was the pep talk that goes with sophisticated hors d'oeuvres, the best wine and flashy smiles. Everybody was being witty, disarming and ever so clever. People seem to be having a good time.

When Jesus arrived, all eyes were on him. I suspect Jesus was wearing his very ordinary garment with a pair of very shabby sandals – the ones he always wears when he's teaching or healing people. One guy whispered to the other – “here comes the rabble-rouser. I wonder what he's up to now.” Jesus watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honour around the table. In those days, tables were lower and closer to the floor than we are used to and guests

would recline on couches or large pillows around the table. The tables would be in the shape of a U with the host and most honoured guests at the head table. In the event an honoured guest would show up a bit late, someone who had taken a position near the host might be asked to find another spot so that the more important guest might be seated near the host. Jesus looked around and he noticed that those seated at the head table were looking proud and tall like peacocks.

Then Jesus couldn't help it any longer. His tongue was itching to say what was on his mind. Jesus discloses a spiritual truth as he talks about table etiquette. "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honour. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host and then you will be moved to another seat." I think Jesus was trying to say: "Why are you people trying to be so important? Why are you so anxious to be seated at the head table? Why can't we all sit together at an ordinary table and have a good conversation?" Everybody was embarrassed by his opening remarks. And Jesus continues, "When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place." Honour at the feast of God's table cannot be taken or demanded, it can only be received as a gift, which is grace. To make the matter worse, Jesus even questioned the guest list. He looked at the host and said, "I see you've invited your friends, and those in your social clubs and your rich neighbors. But where are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Where's my friend Zacchaeus? Where's Bertha - the bent-over woman? Where are the tax collectors? The peasants? The farmers? At this point, the guests were so uncomfortable that some of them were looking for the nearest exit to go out. And then he continues to lecture everyone on the true meaning of humility, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In God's dinner party, the tables will be radically overturned; the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled--this is the counter-cultural vision of the reign of God.

Here's a good story of humility. For the past week or so, we have seen and heard a deluge of reactions to Lisa LaFlamme's unfair dismissal. CTV has been bombarded with complaints from people nationwide accusing Bell Media executives of ageism, sexism, misogyny and stories about how LaFlamme was fired because she allowed her grey hair to go on air.

I'm sure I share some of your views that LaFlamme deserved a dignified departure after 35 years on the air. She announced her goodbye suddenly, on social media, while sitting in a cabin somewhere. She admitted that she was blindsided.

In her video posted on Twitter, I felt Lisa's heartwarming speech. Instead of showing anger or remorse towards those who ousted her, Lisa's humility surfaced all throughout her speech. I felt her authenticity, vulnerability and honesty. For me, her humble spirit was awe-inspiring and I'm sure she has touched millions of people, myself included. She was a preacher not in the pulpit but in the public square through the TV media.

So, what is this about being humble and the virtue of humility that Jesus would like us to emulate? To be humble. Does it mean feeling inferior? Does it mean putting yourself down? Does it mean comparing yourself to others and coming up short? Does it mean having a walking inferiority complex? I don't think so. Is the word humility equivalent to being timid? To be a mouse in the corner? To be afraid to say what's on your mind? To be scared, to stand up and be counted? I don't think so. Humility, according to the Arbinger Institute, is the ability to see the truth about oneself—strengths and weaknesses, ups and downs, contributions and needs—without self-justification. True humility, in other words, is radical self-awareness.” This radical self-awareness is an attitude of the heart which realizes that all good gifts come from God. “All of my talents. All of my money and resources. All my personality traits which allow me to advance in life...Therefore, how can I boast? How can I use these God-given gifts as a measuring stick to elevate myself above others?”¹

Through this gospel story in Luke, Jesus invites us to embrace a wide circle of diversity and inclusion. He reminds us that God's open table is not only meant for everyone, but especially for those whom some would consider unlikely guests. Today, let us be reminded that there is a place at the table for everyone, including those who have had the chair ripped out from under them because of poverty, or social standing or disability. CEOs, politicians, tradespeople, labourers, farmers, scientists, homemakers, church workers, volunteers - the list is endless. Jesus directs us to invite friends, neighbours and strangers alike into our lives – whether it be a family party or a community gathering or simple one-on-one encounters.

American theologian Debie Thomas says it beautifully: “When we dare to gather at God’s table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us...To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our Presidential elections... it's what we're called to do — to humble ourselves and place our hope in a radically different kingdom... Jesus asks us to believe that our behaviour at the table matters — because it does. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveal the stuff of our souls. This is God's world we live in; nothing here is ordinary. In this realm, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels.”²

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Rev. Edward F. Markquart, “You May Not Want to Invite Jesus for Dinner”, <http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com>

² Debie Thomas, “Table Manners”, Journey with Jesus. 2016