

Acumen: Lost Ability in a Lost World

2ND READING – Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion, when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ “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; ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

In today’s lesson, we see Jesus invited to a Pharisees’ house on the sabbath to have dinner. [For those keeping score this summer, this is the third time Jesus has been invited to a Pharisees’ house] Jesus then looks closely at the people who have been invited. Noticing that those at the party were a bunch of self-serving, self-promoting, self-centered individuals, he began to give a parable about guests at a wedding banquet. Jesus isn’t speaking in abstract metaphors, though; he is commenting on the actual visitors to the party. ⁷ *When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor.* I wonder if they even noticed that he was speaking about them.

Illustration:

{while I was doing some training on a Sunday morning in my previous career}

I once heard a pastor give a sermon on this passage, and he made his points very specific to this parable as.

1. Self-promotion = Self-demotion
2. Self-demotion = Self-promotion
3. He brought it together by saying that it was a choice. To follow the traditions of the world to self-promote and be brought low in the eyes of God, or to self-demote and be exalted in the eyes of God.

All the while, he had a huge screen behind him [16ft across], one of the biggest I had ever installed. The church had professional cameramen and, on the screen, in the corner of every slide, was a watermark of the church logo. In the other corner, when he showed a slide was a PIP of his frame. So, when they uploaded the service later to social media, the church would be promoted. The entire situation dripped with irony because the church was doing exactly what he was preaching against.

I have often thought about that sermon, so when the passage showed up in the lectionary and I began to study it. I knew I needed to dive into the irony. So, I googled the church, went back through their video archive, and sure enough, I found it. Just as I remember. I watched it just for fun. He is a very charismatic pastor, funny, and handsome, and there are several hundred people in his congregation each week.

There is more to this parable than the either/or scale of promotions.

Jesus, as he often does, is speaking about way more than what we can do to make God like us. Yes, on the surface, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. This seems like the lesson. I have heard dozens of sermons in my life on being humble that use this passage. However, I believe that Jesus is talking about more than party etiquette. I believe Jesus is teaching the value of discernment. The acumen one must have to take a step back in any situation and ask the question, WWJD? Because believe me, that day, I bet you that Jesus walked to the far end of that table; the place of lowest honor, and he sat down.

Now the readers of this parable in Luke's day see the irony here just like we do. The only one at the meal who deserves a place of honor is Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus' lesson is to be aware of your surroundings, don't be self-absorbed. "Do you think you're special? Well, look at this situation."

Something I've learned in bible study. Jesus is more than the sum of the gospels. Jesus is more than the inferences in the epistles. Even when we read the OT through a Christian prophetic lens; he is so much more. We only get a glimpse of Christ when we read any one part; In today's lesson, we see another aspect of Jesus, Jesus as an Etiquette instructor. We would be wise to be aware of this fact about Jesus. It's one thing to be a good party guest; it's another thing altogether to discern what God wants us to do in any given situation.

It kind of puts into perspective what Paul writes in 1 Cor 15 when he says God is "all in all." How do we describe God? Spirit, healer, teacher, judge, and different people will use different titles. God, through Jesus, is always teaching us to be better. With each parable, with each prayer, and with each action we take in Christ's name, we learn discernment. We gain the acumen of not only humbleness but to be self-aware.

Illustration:

Pastors and Christian educators must be self-aware. As we prepare lessons, sometimes for weeks, hoping to pass on some of the wisdom that came naturally to Jesus, we must put ourselves aside, enter the text, and also bring it out into today's world, and somehow make it coherent for the congregation it is intended for. I cannot get up here and promote myself or something/someone else in this world if I want to get you to focus on the Kingdom of God.

It is incredible that when you study religion, not just Christianity, you see the impact that Christianity [specifically Jesus] has on those religions. Scholars have paired Jesus with the wisdom of Buddha. {though Buddha died 400 years before JC} The Quran refers to Jesus 23 times. [all in a positive manner, Son of God or Messiah] Even Jewish commentaries stop short of calling him Son of God. Hindus tell the story of the saint Ishu, who was born in a cowshed, was visited by three holy men, performed many amazing miracles, walked on water, and spoke an excellent sermon on a mountain.

Jesus' impact on the world goes far beyond what we learn in the gospels. [the bible is still the best witness we have] What we learn by studying this parable goes infinitely beyond how to locate a seat at a party. Jesus is instructing us in life. This lesson is hard for some to hear because humans tend to be human.

So, this morning I ask you to do this. When you are out in the world this coming week, and you find yourself in a public situation. Take a step back. Use the wisdom that Jesus has given us in this parable. Be mindful of the situation and say a little prayer for discernment. "Hey, Jesus, it's me, yeah, I know it's not our regular time to talk, but I want to see this situation clearer; please help me to discern your will right now. Help me humble myself and get out of my way so that I may let you in. Amen."

Think of this when you are cut off in traffic: Do you call the driver a few choice words you don't want the choir members or your Clerk of Session to hear? Or do you ask yourself, I wonder what has happened to that driver to make them reckless today? I pray that they are more careful from now on. Lord, keep them safe.

Think of this when your friends are standing around the water cooler: Is this gossip we are speaking? Or is this joke at someone else's expense? Is this conversation productive, affirming, and acceptable to Christ?

Or when you go to the grocery store or Starbucks and are waiting in line: Lord, am I consciously engaging with the person assigned to help me? Do I see them as a child of God? Or do I see them as a means to an end? When I say, "thank you," do my eyes say it as well? How can I make their \$10 an hour job a little more bearable? How can I make them see you and not me?

Can you follow the etiquette of God's will? Focus on the kingdom of God. Ask WWJD. I wonder how much different our week would be. Would we be exalted to our friends? Would we be thought of as weirdos? Or would we simply be making our lives harder?

According to a Pew Research poll, there are 210 million Christians in the US and 329M people overall. 63% or two-thirds of our population. What would happen if all Christians began to act like this? It starts with us and the example set by Christ. That is something to contemplate.

Let us pray...

Lord, we know that there is nothing that we can do you exalt ourselves to you. That is not why we strive to follow the example of Jesus. That is not why we ask WWJD. Lord, we want to follow Jesus because we want to help in the building of your kingdom. Help us to see the situations we find ourselves in this coming week. Give us the acumen to act accordingly. In the name of Jesus, we pray. AMEN.