

Humiliation or Humility

A sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14 and Sirach 10: 12-18

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight o Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

Luke lays out the scene in the gospel reading. It is the Sabbath. We've been talking about the Sabbath lately and here is another installment.

This passage tells us what the Sabbath means, what it is that happens on the Sabbath and how we should approach it.

In Jesus' time, there was a synagogue service on Sabbath mornings.

This service was structured very much as our worship services still are.

- 1 The **Shema** (Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God; the LORD is one) formed a sort of Call to Worship
- 2 This was followed by a series of **prayers** (18 benedictions and petitions)
- 3 then there was a **Torah reading**,
- 4 and a reading from the **Writings and Prophets**
- 5 this would be followed by a **sermon**
- 6 and then more **psalms and prayers**,
- 7 closing with the **Benediction of Aaron**
(which will sound familiar:
**“The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.”**)

Some things never change, do they?

After worship the Jews would have their morning meal.

In that culture people usually ate twice a day,
and this would have been the earlier one probably.

So say people to pontificate on these things.

And so Jesus is there at the house of some bigwig among the Pharisees,
invited to the meal.

I don't get the impression though that this was a friendly invite to hang out.

The pharisees wanted to watch him - see what he would do.

The same word is used later in the gospel of Luke, in 20:20

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“So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere,
that they might take hold of what he said,
so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.”

The same thing was likely going on here too. Jesus has already been after the Pharisees,
making them face their hypocrisy,
and for some reason they don't like this.

Jesus knows their hearts, their minds, their antipathy towards him.
He goes anyway. Because he loves them anyway.

This is Jesus loving his enemies.

In Ezekiel, one of my favorite passages, the Lord says through the prophet:
As I live...I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,
but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

Turn, turn from your evil ways!
For why should you die, O house of Israel?

If that's how God sees it, of course
Jesus is going to keep challenging them to come 'round right.
and many do, by the way. Many of Jesus' followers came from the pharisee camp

And so Jesus is there at the table as an invited guest,
being exactly who he is, loving those watching for him to screw up, desiring to heal them
of their hard hearts and swelled heads.

Luke and his original audience were steeped in liturgy,
and may have read this to be an explanation of the eucharist, of Communion.

You can think that's a bit of a stretch, but do think about it
This is a meal directly after the synagogue service, which maps very closely to the agape
meal following the Christian worship service, which is when the Sacrament originally
took place until it was fused onto the main part of the liturgy.

This is a meal to which Jesus was called on to be present.

And what is it that happens when Christ shows up?

He heals, among other things.

Which is often how the Sacrament of Communion was described, i.e. as medicine,
throughout Christian history, but especially in the first several centuries.

The first healing he does at this gathering is for the man with dropsy.
Dropsy is a disease in which fluid in the body cavities that causes the swelling that
characterizes it. I'm sure you really wanted all the graphic details, didn't you?

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The physical, outward healing of the swollen man sets Jesus up
to do the same thing on another level.

Sacramentally, if you will.

It is the outward sign of invisible grace,
or however it is sacraments are explained.

The swelled body is healed, now on to the swelled egos.

He dismisses the man,
perhaps signaling that it is time to move beyond that physical sign.

Just as anyone could tell the physical affliction of dropsy,
Jesus sees a spiritual problem with his table-mates just as plainly.

He sees the guests jockeying for the best positions at the table,
those positions that would display their high rank and honor.
And he addresses them, calling them out, reminding them of their own scriptures.

Proverbs 25:6-7

“Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence
or stand in the place of the great;
for it is better to be told, “come up here,”
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”

And if you value your social standing
- you wouldn’t have been jockeying for the best seats if you didn’t -
then being publicly demoted is going to suck.

Humiliation is not pleasant,
and in this way, pride can be its own punishment.

Because Pride leads to Shame.

In both Proverbs and Luke’s presentation of this encounter,
the problem with sitting higher than is warranted,
the problem with thinking too much of yourself,
is the risk of shame.

“pride goeth before the fall”
this is repeated over and over throughout the Hebrew scriptures:

Proverbs 11:2 “when pride comes, then comes shame”

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Proverbs 16:18 “Before destruction is pride,
and before stumbling, a haughty spirit”

Proverbs 29:33 A man’s pride shall bring him low”

Isaiah 2:11-12 “the lofty looks of man shall be humbled,
and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down”

It all says the same truth.

Sometimes people think of the opposite of shame as pride, but no.
Shame and Pride are the same preoccupation with yourself.
just in different situations.

When that station you care about seems high, it is pride,
when its emptiness is revealed, it becomes shame.

Jesus is not just warning them about social humiliation.
He’s calling them back to himself. Calling them to repent, to turn around to a different
value system, in which people see through the lens of God’s love.

This is what it means when Jesus says
God will exalt those who humble themselves.

If pride invites its own punishment, humility has its own rewards.

I. Humility rearranges our priorities and values

Our own desires become less important than the needs of others
other people cease to be tools for our own advancement
and are revealed to be human persons, God’s own image however distorted
instead of measuring a person’s success by their economic output,
to free them to live fulfilling lives.

[I don’t know how closely any of you have been following
any of the presidential campaigns going on,
but the fifth or sixth candidate in the polls right now - Andrew Yang,
has brought this discussion of how people are valued to the debate stage.
He points out that a person’s value to society is often obscured
by their economic value and includes suicide rates, civic engagement levels,
volunteerism, environmental quality, etc. when talking about the nation’s well-being.

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The last thing I want is to get political up here,
so you look him up on your own time and make your own decisions.
I only find it fascinating and hopeful that questions of
how we assign value to people is getting to be part of the national conversation.
Philosophy majors everywhere must be thrilled]

II. **Humility offers freedom and even confidence.**

This might seem counter intuitive, but it is absolutely true.
Confidence is not walking into a room sure that everyone is going to like you.
It is being secure in the knowledge that you are okay if they don't.
If you knew you were going to be comfortable in your own skin no matter what, that
really frees you up from trying to protect yourself from everything.

An attitude of humility does that.

If you give yourself permission to fail, you give yourself permission to try.
I remember being nervous playing the piano in front of you when I was a kid, and i
remember being told that this was the friendliest audience I could ever hope for. Because
even if I lost my place or played a wrong note,
you were just happy to see me up here trying.
It's the only way I'm able to keep getting up here to preach at you.

III. **Best, humility is the foundation of the spiritual life, enabling our hearts to be open to God and to draw near to him, instead of shrinking back out of shame and unworthiness.**

You very well may think yourself unworthy, but accepting that, or in being okay
assuming the position you think beneath you, choosing to do so, gives you the courage to
stop shutting God out, to stop hiding.

Great, Humility is the powerful foundation of life with God,
that does not make it easy to cultivate.

But Jesus gives us some pointers:

To those invited to the banquet,
be content taking the lowest place.

That is, it helps to deny ourselves some of that vain human glory our egos crave.

It also helps to focus on others.

Helping someone else relieves sadness and helps you discover joy in lowliness.

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To those throwing banquets, the advise is the same.

Don't always be doing things only to serve your own interests.

Don't throw banquets if you are only concerned with what's in it for you.

Consider your motivations, be aware of them.

Tame your desire for glory with serving those who cannot repay you.

Christ himself was humble, and invites us to follow that example.

He calls us to turn back to this pattern of humanity that is the very image of God.

He welcomes us into his own life, so he can exalt us in our humility.

Now to the One

who by the power at work within us

is able to do far more abundantly

than all we can ask or imagine,

to God be glory in the church

and in Christ Jesus

to all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.