

Pentecost c15

August 28, 2016

"Hierarchies"

Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair

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Luke 14:1-14

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.

⁷When 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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

A.

When I was a teenager, I participated in the Scouting program at my church. It was the fall of my second or third year in the program; the troop was getting organized for the coming year, and I had decided it was time to make my move, to take a leadership role in the troop by becoming a patrol leader. Over the previous months I had become a little disappointed, a little disenchanted with the leadership of my patrol leader. I don't remember now what it was specifically that disappointed me, but I felt we had accomplished little over the previous year as a patrol and that if I became patrol leader we could accomplish much more. I wanted to have the authority that I thought came with leadership, with a more distinguished place in the hierarchy of the troop.

At one of our first meetings of the year each patrol held an election for its leader. It was simple: on a piece of paper write down the name of the person you wanted to have as your patrol leader. We all handed in our votes. But there was a discrepancy, either too many votes or not enough, I don't remember which. But our adult leaders solved the problem by asking us to claim our pieces of paper, our votes with the name written on them, and read them out loud so they could be counted. The only person who voted for me, was me. There was no majority of votes for anyone so we had to vote again. And that time there were no votes for me, not even my own.

1.

Jesus is on his way to dinner with a Pharisee and while on his way suddenly comes across a man who is suffering from a disfiguring illness. It is the Sabbath and everyone, especially the other Pharisees and important people, are watching Jesus to see what he will do. Jesus asks them if he should heal the man or not. They are silent. And so Jesus heals him and sends him on his

way, telling those who watched silently that they would do the same in private for a family member, but not in public where they would be criticized.

When he arrives at the dinner, Jesus is the one watching. Dinner guests are jostling one another for good seats where they will be seen, recognized, acknowledged, for their place in the pecking order. And so Jesus gives some advice, maybe even shrewd advice: Be careful about trying to assert yourself by taking a prominent seat at the banquet, because someone more important than you might come late and you will have to move to a lesser seat. How embarrassing! Why not take a more humble place at the table, a seat that is out of the way, and maybe your host will notice you there and move you on up to a more prominent seat where you will receive the attention and honor and deference you feel you deserve.

It sounds like Jesus is playing along with the game, like he's promoting the guests' desire to be admired and honored by faking humility so they can get the respect they really want. But then Jesus turns it upside down by saying, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He's not talking about dinner etiquette after all. He's talking about the future, about the heavenly banquet when it will be surprising how the truly humble, even the truly humbled like the man with the disfiguring illness, will end up sitting in the seats of honor.

2.

Don't we also see hierarchies in our own lives, our communities, and our world?

We will be electing a president soon. And the arguments for the candidates have lately come down to who deserves to be elected, an argument of personal superiority versus inferiority. What happened to service?

Our businesses and our work life are organized around hierarchies. There are bosses and there are employees. Some people are more important than others. Some people deserve respect because of their place in the pecking order, while others should know their place and follow their superior's orders.

Just this month we watched the Olympics, symbolized by five interlocking rings of five different colors representing the colors of all the national flags in the world: a very idealistic, inclusive organization. But during these games we celebrated the winners with medals and put them on platforms. The national anthems of only the best were played.

Even pastors adopt these ideas of hierarchy. You can't count all the books written for them about leadership, sometimes just reworked ideas from business or politics. I had a professor who liked to say good pastors are good followers of Jesus and if anyone wants to follow them following Jesus, then that's fine. But don't be encouraging pastors to become better leaders when what they really need is to become better followers.

3.

Luke is on this track as he tells us today about Jesus at the banquet. We forget that when Jesus stopped on the Sabbath to heal the man disfigured by illness, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. When he attended the banquet at the home of the Pharisee he was on his way to Jerusalem, to the cross. That is humility.

And that is how some people define our humility- that we know the truth about God and about ourselves. Jesus was on his way to give himself for you and me. Whether we deserve it or not, God's love for us was expressed on the cross in Jerusalem. We didn't earn that love, it was a gift, and so knowing that truth frees us from any hierarchies we may have believed we could be a part of.

Like Jesus who was on his way to Jerusalem, we are on our way too, to the great heavenly banquet where Jesus will welcome all whom he has freed. At that table will be those we thought we outranked and those we believed were unworthy. The exalted will be humbled and the humble will be exalted as everyone finds their place at the table.

4.

At the Olympics a couple weeks ago you may have seen the story about the two women runners who collided during their 5000 meter race. Nikki Hamblin from New Zealand and Abbey D'Agostino from the U.S. tripped each other up about halfway through their race and both fell to the ground. Rather than jump up and get back into the race, Abbey, from Boston, got up and checked on Nikki to see if she was all right and pulling her up from the ground said, "C'mon, we have to finish." Abbey got up and they started running together, but within a few steps Abbey fell down again, suffering from a ruptured knee ligament. Nikki stopped, came back, and pulled Abbey up and helped her get running again, despite her injury. Abbey encouraged Nikki to go on and finish the race, which she did, coming in last, except that Abbey kept going, painfully running her last mile, arriving at the finish line where Nikki was waiting for her.

They weren't winners in the usual sense, but they saw themselves in a race bigger than the one on that track. For their humility, their willingness to give up coming in first, they were awarded the very rare Pierre de Coubertin medal, named for the founder of the modern Olympics.

After the race, Abbey said, "Although my actions were instinctual at that moment, the only way I can and have rationalized it is that God prepared my heart to respond that way. This whole time here God's made clear to me that my experience in Rio was going to be about more than my race performance—and as soon as Nikki got up I knew that was it."¹

Just like at the banquet table where Jesus watched how people found their seats, we also have in our everyday lives, in the smallest of circumstances, opportunities-- opportunities to live as

¹ <https://news.dartmouth.edu/news/2016/08/dagostinos-injuries-end-her-run-rio-games>

those who know the truth about ourselves. We are children of God, loved by God, welcomed by God, served by God. And our relationships with each other are not based on a hierarchy where some are above others. We look beyond enforcing our own will and expecting obedience because it is owed to us. Instead, we link arms and help each other over the finish line and into the kingdom.