

Luke 14:1, 7-14

When my sister and I were younger, my parents decided that it would be a great idea to enroll us in an etiquette class. I only remember a few tiny snippets of what we learned during those classes. Most of it revolved around meals: how to set a table, which plate or piece of silverware to use for what course, how to fold a napkin, etc. I'm sure we learned, or, at least, were meant to learn, other things what would make us better, less feral members of society. Of course, there is a reason I don't remember much from those lessons. It's become a Collette family legend, one of those stories my parents love telling most. And it just so happens that my mom and dad are here today. (They have no idea I was going to do this this morning). But, why, mom and dad, is it that I can't remember much from those etiquette classes?

Unfortunately, that's right, my sister and I were kicked out of those very same etiquette classes. I can't really remember the reason, but it's likely we were too disruptive or just too disinterested to try. Whatever the reason, we were strongly invited to consider not attending the remaining classes. I'm sure my sister and I were not too heartbroken by the idea of getting out of etiquette lessons, but what we couldn't have known then is just how often that story would come up. We've just never managed to live down being kicked out of our etiquette classes.

Well, and I'm glad my parents are here to hear this, it would seem like my sister and I are in some good, divine company. As today's Gospel reading points out, it doesn't seem like Jesus was one for following etiquette, either, as he upends a bunch of social norms at the dinner he attends in today's Gospel reading. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus is continuously shown as having little regard for tradition and social norms, especially when those traditions and social

norms get in the way of our ability to love others and our God-given mission to recognize and serve the dignity of all our fellow human beings.

The setting for today's Gospel reading is a dinner being hosted by an unnamed Pharisee of which Jesus is an invited guest. Our Gospel tells us that these same Pharisees are watching Jesus closely. It adds to an air of ominousness that permeates this entire section of Luke's gospel. This whole section, beginning way back in chapter 9 and continuing to chapter 19, is one long procession to the cross. Jesus knows what is coming, but he does not and will not run from it. Instead, the looming cross will give his teachings in this section a sense of urgency and sincerity, like Jesus knows time is running short and still has so much he wants to teach and share with us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the motif of mealtime to teach us about humility. To fully understand his teaching, we need to know a little about Jewish meal habits in Jesus' time. Hosts and guests would have followed strict social norms during meals. In a single meal, you could learn how pious your fellow guests were – did they observe the proper cleansing rituals? You could learn whether they followed proper etiquette in what they wore, what they ate, and when they ate it. And you could clearly have seen the social hierarchy at play in where people sat during the meal, with more honored and important guests sitting closer to the head of the table, while those of lower importance sat at the bottom, furthest away from the host. One of the commentaries I read this week as I prepared this sermon pointed out that even the food pointed to the social hierarchy, with those of more importance sometimes being served food and wine of higher quality than those sitting at the bottom of the table. In our women's Bible study class on Tuesday, we likened it to the middle school lunchroom on the first day of school. Who you ate

with, where you sat, even down to what you ate could have a massive impact on the rest of the year. It seems our social anxiety around meals is timeless.

It's in the context of one of these meals, as he watches the guests jockey for the positions of the greatest honor, that Jesus decides to offer a lesson to those assembled. Notice that our Gospel reading calls this a parable, rather than a lesson on etiquette. We can't read the words that come next as simple instructions for how to survive the social stress of mealtime. Instead, like all parables, Jesus is using an everyday, common thing to teach us a deeper lesson about the Kingdom of God. Jesus shares a parable and a lesson in today's Gospel reading, one for guests and one for hosts. In both of them, Jesus will implore us to value humility and care over and above glory and self-importance.

In the first parable, Jesus tells his listeners of a wedding banquet. When invited, he says, consider taking the lowest seat at the table instead of the highest. That way, we save ourselves the risk of humiliation and instead invite the possibility of having a greater honor conferred on us by the host if and when they rescue us from our lowly seats of nonimportance. Don't be fooled, though. This is certainly not Jesus' tried and true methods for playing the social politics game with even better effectiveness. Jesus is not telling us to game our way into being honored in front of the other guests with false or pretend humbleness. Remember, this is a parable, and all parables are designed to help us better understand what God's coming kingdom will be like, the one we should be striving to build up on earth. Jesus is calling us to lives characterized by humility. This isn't news to Jesus' followers, and it shouldn't be news to us. Not twenty verses before our Gospel reading today Jesus told his followers that the last will be first, and the first will be last in the coming kingdom. This is, of course, good news to those who continue to find

themselves at the bottom, those who are powerless, overlooked, and underappreciated. It is good news to those who don't seek honor, who don't seek glory, who don't seek to find themselves in positions of power.

In the second teaching, Jesus extends his invitation to cultivate humility to hosts as well as to guests, telling those who would host a dinner not to use it as a chance to curry favor or show off riches, but to invite those who are lowly, left out, forgotten, and marginalized. Again, Jesus invites us to reconsider our participation in games of social politicking. When we seek and serve those who cannot repay us, the reward isn't glory, but something far greater – building up a world that is kinder, better, Godlier, and more righteous.

So it is, Jesus says, that everyone who attempts to exalt themselves will always run the risk of being humbled. But those who cultivate lives of humility open themselves up to the Kingdom of Heaven. We need look no further than to Jesus himself to see this life of chosen humility played out. Jesus, the son of a carpenter, born of a poor, unmarried woman. Jesus who grows up in a small, backwater village, in a small, occupied country. Jesus who constantly associates with sinners and outcasts and those in poverty and those experiencing debilitating and chronic illness, who makes sure that those people have a place at the greatest table, the one in the coming kingdom of heaven. This is who God *chose* to be, the life God *chose* to live. This is how Jesus changed the world. This path of humility is the very one God chose when God chose to be among us, not as one who lords power and influence and prestige over others, but as one who walks beside us, who cares, and gives, and loves others fully and completely. This is the path that God calls us to, as well.

We absolutely can be so drunk on our own ambition, so blinded by our own need to feel important, so obsessed with a need to be liked and accepted by the *right* people that we forget that God is calling us to care for and about all people. Jesus calls us out of social norms, games of etiquette, and social politics, to instead cultivate lives that are humble, kind, and generous, especially those who are marginalized and undervalued. In doing so, we open ourselves up to see the people God is calling us to care for most. In doing so free ourselves to work with God to continue building up the kingdom of heaven.