

## What's My Reward?

### **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. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

You don't need assigned seats around the family dinner table. When I was growing up, everyone just knew where the others sat. And everyone sat in the same chair every night. There were five of us, and six seats – so in theory, someone could have chosen to move without ‘stealing’ someone else's seat. But it never happened.

On the rare and special occasions that we had family visiting, it was not unusual for my sisters and I to make place cards and assign seats. Partly we did this because it seemed all fancy and grown up. But mostly, we did it so that we could arrange it so that we got to sit next to the visiting guest. This worked out great when our grandparents visited. Two grandparents; each can sit with a grandchild on their right and their left; that makes four special seats. And there were only three of us. No problem. But when, for example, Aunt Karen came to visit, there could be more of a scuffle. Only two special seats, but three nieces vying for her attention. On more than one occasion, I remember me or my sisters sneaking back into the dining room to rearrange the place cards, hoping to avoid detection by the other sisters until it was too late.

But most of the time, when we are invited to dinner somewhere, there isn't any assigned seating. That wasn't the case in Jesus' day. In our reading this morning, Jesus is at a dinner party. Nothing too fancy, just a Sabbath meal. This isn't a wedding or the Passover. But as he looks

around, Jesus sees that people are pretty compulsive about how they seat themselves at the table. Everyone knows the host sits in a designated spot. And the closer you sit to the host, the more important you are. Jesus noticed all the guests were trying to get the best possible seats to gain the more honor.

So Jesus gave them some advice. If you claim the seat of highest honor, you might be in for a fall. Because if you claim a seat that's higher than you really deserve, the host might have to ask you to move down. And in front of all the other status-aware guests, that would be really embarrassing. Wouldn't it be better to take a seat that's way on the low end? Because then, if you sit too far down, the host might personally invite you to move up. And in front of all the other guests, that would be a great honor.

Now we have to really understand what Jesus is saying here. He is not suggesting that these Pharisees should take a humble position at the table while maintaining their pride in their hearts. If you move to the low end of the table for the express purpose of being asked to move up, you're just as guilty of self-centered behavior as those who are fighting over the seats of honor. Jesus is suggesting they move to the low end of the table by expressing true humility. By recognizing that they are not any better or more valuable than anyone else at the table.

Although Jesus doesn't give us the vice-versa, mirror-image of this advice, it is implied here as well. Consider for a moment those people who might always assume they are the lowest on the social ladder. They take the lowest seats, amazed that they were even invited to the dinner in the first place. They don't make eye contact with anyone. Jesus is not speaking to these people when he tells the guests they are acting with a shameful amount of pride. Had people of this attitude been in attendance, I imagine Jesus would have told them they were expressing a

different side of self-centeredness. The kind that undervalues the self and produces a damaging self-image. But the advice from Jesus would probably be the same.

Picture in your head a nice, long dining table. The host is at the head. Jesus suggests if you sit too close to the host, you may have to slide closer to the middle. And if you sit too far from the host, you may be invited to slide closer to the middle. And that's where we find true humility. True humility isn't a low self-esteem problem. Humility is being in right relationship with others. King Arthur doesn't come around for over 10 centuries, but I think Jesus would have liked his concept of the Round Table. It's a table of equals, where no seat has greater value than any other. And that's how God sees us; each person has value, but no one has greater or lesser worth than anyone else.

And humility isn't about your position at the table or your social status. Anyone can slide a few chairs to the right or left because they are asked. Jesus is talking about really feeling humility in your heart, not simply pretending and living out some empty actions. Consider two contestants that appeared on cooking shows on TV this summer. On one show, Ben was the guy who saw himself as God's Gift to the Kitchen. He repeatedly told the camera (and the other contestants) that he knew he was the best chef there. Even when he messed up and was chastised, he claimed that he was still the best one there. The host asked him to move down a few seats, but he still saw himself in the place of honor.

On the contrary, Aarti was the contestant who could cook circles around the other competitors, but she constantly doubted herself. She got so anxious about the judging it affected her work. The judges told her she had to stop expressing her doubt out loud if she wanted to continue in the competition. The host invited her to slide up a few seats, but she still struggled to

see herself as someone of value. But where Ben refused to change in his heart, Aarti worked hard at it. In the end, Ben was asked to leave, and Aarti won the grand prize.

So what is our prize? What is the reward for leading a life of humility? Well, if you're asking that question, you haven't really found true humility yet. Humility doesn't ask to be rewarded. That's what Jesus is getting at with the second piece of advice he hands out at the dinner party. He speaks just to the host and tells him, "You really messed up tonight. Your guest list is all wrong. You invited all the 'right' people to make yourself look good. And they accepted the invitations because they should. People are only here to network, social climb and gossip. No wonder people are more concerned about where they sit than anything else!"

Next time, Jesus says, instead of throwing a dinner party for these social climbers, invite people who will really appreciate the experience. Invite people who need the food. Invite those who will be encouraged and heartened by the company and the conversation. And that means you won't invite the people here tonight. You might not even invite your friends and family. You'll invite the poor, the stranger, the orphans and widows. And none of them will ever be able to repay you. And that, Jesus says, is exactly the point. Stop trying to live with this 'tit for tat' mentality. It's not about getting rewarded. It's about doing the right thing and living the right way.

We also need to remember that Jesus wasn't speaking only literally. He wasn't just talking about dinner parties and seating arrangements. He was talking about expressing humility in every arena of our lives. What if the table is really a symbol, representing our lives. The real issue then isn't whom we invite to our next dinner party. The question becomes, "Whom do we invite into our lives? Whom do we see as people with or without honor and value? And how do we treat them?"

Basically, Jesus is asking us as his followers to live our lives in a way that values individuals, not for what they have, can do, or give to us, but rather because they, too, are created in the image of God. And so we give food to the hungry, even if they will never invite us to dinner. We are kind and respectful to those who don't really deserve it and who will never treat us with kindness. And we don't do it because we are pushovers or doormats. We do it because Jesus asks us to live with humility, and to recognize the inherent worth of every human being.

By eating with those who have less than us, by associating with those who we think are less than us, we put ourselves in the position of receiving something valuable that they have to offer us. And it's not usually a financial or status reward. It's the kind of reward that comes from being in meaningful relationships with other people. Lots of teachers report that they learn as much from their students as they felt they have managed to teach. Students who go on mission trips give of themselves, with their time and skills and resources, but most of them return home feeling that they received more than they gave.

And if that's not enough for you, Jesus promises us that there is indeed a reward from God. It just doesn't come right away. At the end of his story this morning, Jesus tells the dinner host that if he hosts this different kind of dinner party, inviting and welcoming those who cannot repay him, he will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Is resurrection, eternal life, the reward? Or will the reward come as something God gives us in heaven? I don't know. But it's not really about the reward. It's about finding our place in God's creation – valuing others and valuing ourselves – and in the process, helping to bring about God's kingdom. Amen and amen.