

Becoming More Than Ourselves  
Luke 14:1, 7-14  
September 5, 2021  
Kory Wilcoxson

This story always reminds me of the old Budweiser commercial with Bob Uecker. He's sitting in his great seat at a baseball game when an usher comes up to him and says, "Wrong seats, buddy," to which Uecker responds, "I must be in the front row!" The end of the commercial shows sitting by himself in the nosebleed section shout, "He missed the tag!"

At first glance, it seems like in this story Jesus is offering a lesson on proper dinner party etiquette. Don't confuse the shrimp fork with the salad fork, don't reach across the person next to you for the salad dressing, don't sit in the wrong chair.

The notion of etiquette seems to have gone by the wayside in our society, but even though it may not be obviously apparent, there are still certain rules in our society for how to behave and act properly in certain situations. Dictionary.com defines etiquette as "conventional requirements as to social behavior." In other words, how not to make a fool of yourself in public.

There are etiquette rules for all kinds of social situations. When I do weddings, I have to be aware of all the traditions and behaviors that go along with such an important occasion. For example, Jay Leno said good etiquette is politely waiting in the receiving line for 10 minutes to kiss the bride. Bad etiquette is kissing the bride for 10 minutes. Jesus is also addressing issues of etiquette here, but not social etiquette or wedding etiquette. He's talking about what my friend David Shirey called "kingdom etiquette." In other words, there are certain conventional requirements for how Christians are to live out their faith in everyday life in order to make God's kingdom real here on earth.

Today's etiquette lesson is on banquet behavior. For this meal, Jesus has been invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee. That right there tells us that this was no potluck. The crowd did not go through an assembly line scooping out spoonfuls of potato salad onto their paper plates and grabbing their soft drinks from a cooler. These were carefully planned lavish affairs, formal sit-down dinners with a white lace tablecloth and the finest china. And with such affairs came certain rules of etiquette, including who was to sit where. The tables were arranged in a U shape, with the host sitting in the middle of the base of the U. The seats to the host's immediate right and left would be the seats of honor, and the farther away the seats got from the host, the less important the person sitting there.

So here's the scene: The party starts, guests are arriving, hors d'oeuvres are being passed around. As mealtime approaches, Jesus notices that a number of people seem to be making it a point to have their next conversation in close proximity to the seats of honor. This was no coincidence. It's like a wise preacher who always makes sure that when he says the blessing for a church meal, he just happens to be standing right where the chow line will start. "God bless this food. Amen. Oh! Would you look at that? What divine luck!"

In Jewish society, there was far more at stake than getting to eat first. A person's livelihood, their standing in the community, even their general well-being was dependent upon their reputation. If you had a good reputation, doors opened for you, people wanted to do business with you, you were respected and included. And reputations were built at places like dinner parties thrown by prominent Pharisees, where the people sitting closest to the host were considered the most important. "I must be in the front row!" You had a better chance of being

invited to sit in the most desirable seat if you were in proximity to it, so thus began this awkward social dance of positioning among the dinner guests.

This whole ballet must have seemed pretty absurd to Jesus, all these prominent religious leaders elbowing and jostling their way to the best seats like a child's game of musical chairs. So Jesus calls them on it, using one of their own scriptures to expose their game. Proverbs 25 says, "Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman."

Remember holiday meals as a kid? All your family would be gathered together, and because the dining room table wasn't big enough, you had to sit at the kids' table. The adults would have the fine wooden table with the fancy seats, and you got the rickety folding card table with the broken lawn chairs. Do you remember what it felt like when you first got to sit at the adults' table? Please tell me, because I haven't gotten to do that yet. What a great feeling, to be elevated to adult status, to leave behind the card table and paper napkins for the big time!

It's human nature for us to want to sit at the adult table, to be in the front row. Can you blame the dinner guests for wanting to be seated next to the host? Why would anyone voluntarily choose the lowest seat, the seat of least importance? It's human nature to want to be noticed, to be thought of with great respect, to want to be told, "You're important." Status carries with it a boost of self-esteem, and that feels good, doesn't it? Everyone wants to be valued and respected. Scientists have proven that we need attention as humans because, without it, we will shrivel inside. We need connection, we need community, we need to be liked and accepted. We want others to feel good about us so we can feel good about ourselves. That's a part of being human.

But there's a dark side to this need, which is what Jesus is pointing out to the dinner guests. Our need to be liked becomes dangerous when we start to believe we deserve the seat of honor, when we buy into our own press about how great we think we are. This trait is best exemplified for me by a character from the show "The Good Place." Tahani is a one of the rich upper class who tries to hide her inflated sense of self with false modesty. One of my favorite quotes from her comes after she is complimented for throwing a lavish party. She says, "I would say I outdid myself, but I'm always this good. So I simply did myself."

Our desire to be appreciated can be trouble when it becomes a right we deserve rather than a something we earn, because what often happens when we develop a sense of entitlement is that we begin to see others as means to an end. I'm going to go talk with this guy, not because I care about him, but because he's standing close to the seats of honor. We start seeing others as tools to be used by us so we can get what we want, regardless of what happens to the other person. We don't care who sits in the last seat, as long as it isn't us!

Jesus said, "Go and sit in the lowest place." He's not talking about sitting in a certain chair, but adopting a certain demeanor: it's called humility. It's interesting that the words "humiliation" and "humility" share the same root. It means "earth." To be humble is literally to be "down-to-earth." Practicing kingdom etiquette means realizing that at God's table, there are no special seats of honor, because every seat is a seat of honor. No one is more important than anyone else. Jesus is telling the guests that our importance is not derived from what others think of us, but from what God thinks of us.

Jesus emphasizes this point with the advice to the host about who we should invite to dinner. He says we shouldn't invite people who can pay us back, like our friends and family. Instead, we should invite people who don't have the means to pay us back: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. A pastor friend of mine said that he once preached on this passage, and

the next week he got three dinner invitations. He said he was afraid to ask which of those four categories he fell into.

Both the parable about seating and the story about dinner guests make the same point: in God's kingdom, everyone is invited. At God's table, we are all guests, invited there by the host. Who can repay God? And yet, we are each given a seat of honor. You. Me. The homeless man looking for help. The workers who mow your grass or collect your garbage. Everyone. There are no exceptions. There are no social pecking orders. There is no division between the entitled and the rest of the world. Everyone.

That sounds so simple, doesn't it? This isn't the Sunday New York Times Crossword here. Everyone counts. But that's so different than the culture we live in, which tells us that our value is derived from what others think of us, so we better do everything we can to be seen and heard and thought of in a positive light. We are told to seek status and build our reputation, but Jesus says we should voluntarily stand on the periphery. Here's the problem: that positive light doesn't shine on the periphery. It doesn't shine on the last chair. It only shines on the places and people of importance. "Go and sit in the last place." But the people in the last place don't get noticed! No one on the periphery gets accolades for their good deeds or gets esteemed for their good qualities. Who's going to applaud me for how humble I am if no one sees me being humble?

Jesus tells the guests, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted." The Bible translation "The Message" says it this way: "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to simply be yourself, you'll become more than yourself."

Be yourself. Don't try to be someone else, someone more important, someone more likeable. God made you who you are. Be yourself. And make sure there's room at the table for everyone else. That may mean giving up our seat to someone who has been relegated to the nosebleed section of life, someone who isn't sure they actually belong at the table. There's someone in our life right now who needs to know they matter, that they have a place in God's front row. What can you do to show them that, to let them know they have a seat at God's table? The world will try to tell us what we need to do to matter. But Jesus gives us different criteria: be yourself, and as you are, God will make you more than yourself, filling up the space we leave empty with goodness and love and grace that we can share with others. Everyone is invited to God's table. It's our job to make sure there's a place for them.