

BECOMING REAL

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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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..."

I haven't been to any banquets lately, but I did spend a few lunchtime hours in the Shepherd University cafeteria last week at the annual "Spirituality Awareness Fair." I was there, along with Joshua and his wife Karis, representing our college student fellowship program, Connections. Unlike past years, when the handful of groups with campus programs came to offer themselves to any interested students, this year, a wider net was cast, and so we were joined by faith communities from entire area; more than a dozen groups were there, most to make a pitch—with religious tracts, worship schedules (and shuttle schedules), and also toys, plastic hats, ice cream, energy drinks, clever study kits including Jesus mints, and one elaborate display featuring a giant flat screen TV playing a video loop of high energy, electric praise worship that is, so the film itself declared: relevant, inspiring and true. Connections had half a table, in the back, with some cards about our program, and, of course, your amazing cookies.

I appreciated the effort, and the diversity offered--everything from LDS to Baha'i, Muslim, Catholic, Living Room, and yes, Presbyterian. But the sum total was just a little too big, too loud and in spots way too aggressive, so the end result was far fewer students willing to wander through, to consider possibilities, to be open to whatever invitation might have been present for them that day.

I did greet a some old friends, a few new ones, had fun with Josh and Karis getting our name out there one more time, and I came away more convinced than ever that our invitation— to *all*, to break bread, to listen deeply, to build community, to seek peace—is more ir-relevant and more essential than ever before, not just for those few students looking for a table like ours, but for us as well.

In our story today, Jesus is at table as usual—as scholar N. T. Wright has observed, "Luke's gospel has more meal-time scenes than all the others. If his vision of the Christian life, from one point of view is a journey, from another point of view it's a party." A party where, according to Jesus anyway, all are welcome, and all are valued equally. In this particular party—a Sabbath meal with Pharisees and lawyers--that's a tough sell. And so we see Jesus at his wily best using familiar words and images to upset everything and everyone.

So his Miss Manner's seating advice-- don't take the place of honor without being asked or you may be embarrassed—comes straight out of the book of Proverbs, an ancient collection of

sayings and folk wisdom about right living. Alongside that, he places a line from the prophetic tradition all the way back to the beginning, through the prophets and echoed in his mother's own song in the first chapter of Luke: "The humble will be lifted and the exalted laid low." Except here, Jesus turns it around and gives it a little twist: For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Or, as Eugene Peterson's paraphrase puts it: 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 be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.

Humility--apparently no more popular then--at least among those first century movers and shakers-- than it is with us today. We tend to associate it with humiliation, punishment, self-denial. Or false humility--*please... you take the best seat*--which is really a subtle form of manipulation. And it doesn't help at all that passages like this one, exhorting humility, meekness, lowliness have for centuries been used as weapons to keep women and other persecuted groups in their places.

But, humility and humanity (not to mention humor) all come from the same root word *humus*--earth. To be humble, to be human at its most basic, is to be earthy, grounded, to be real. According to scripture Jesus is the icon of what true humility is all about. Check out the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, an ancient hymn celebrating Christ, God, incarnation, humility. In a Christian context, then, humility is also an essential attribute of God, an observation that was so central to St. Francis, and lives on in Franciscan theology and spirituality. And the very human Jesus in our story today is anything but meek; he is bold, crafty, and I like to imagine, has a twinkle in his eye, as he confronts the abuse of power right in its own home, and in its own idiom. The Pharisees, we are told, are watching him but Jesus watches back. And the first thing he does, which our reading skips over, is notice and heal a crippled man. On the Sabbath. In open defiance of religious law. Again. Recall that in last week's story, he does the same thing-- in the synagogue --and causes quite a stir with his claim that healing--liberation--is in fact a most authentic Sabbath practice--which may be why this second Sabbath healing is met with stony silence.

This is the background for his comments about seating etiquette, drawing his listeners in with familiar words and appealing to their vanity before lobbing the zinger--when you give a party he tells the host, don't invite your friends, family or rich neighbors--in other words, don't invite all these people--invite instead the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, all those excluded from your table today. Get off the power grid entirely, love others as God has loved you--freely and unconditionally--and you will be blessed.

Some of the most off the grid Christians in all of history were the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth and fifth centuries who were also, not coincidentally, some of the most authentically humble and radically hospitable humans who ever lived. Appalled by the unholy marriage of Christian faith and political power that began under the Emperor Constantine (and haunts us to this day) these men and women fled, by the thousands, to the deserts of the near east seeking authentic community. There, together, they discovered the essence of Christian life, which they summed up in the invitation to love God and neighbor, *To Love as God Loves*, according to Roberta Bondi in her fabulous book of the same name. And, in the desert, they learned that the attitude of heart that makes such radical love possible is humility, which has nothing to do with inferiority, low self-image, or manipulative self-sacrifice. It is instead the living out --the embodiment in every act of every day--of the revolutionary conviction that all human beings, every man, woman, and child, ourselves and our "enemies" are beloved creatures of God.

This powerful conviction underlies our faith and is enshrined in our own national self-definition--all are created equal--and it is systematically undermined in a culture of excessive personal and national self-preoccupation. So claims a powerful new book by two prominent

psychologists *“The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in an Age of Entitlement”* which details our growing cultural obsession with power and position, celebrity, money, and outward appearance, and the consequences in destructive overconsumption, environmental devastation, financial meltdown, loneliness, depression and an appalling incivility in all walks of life. Apparently those who exalt themselves really do get laid low, in more ways than one. It’s a fascinating and sobering study that warrants a whole lot more conversation (especially for anyone dealing with the Facebook generation, which never had a chance) but I want to jump ahead to their prescription for addressing this crippling disease; the primary antidote to narcissism, according to this study, is humility, authentic self knowledge which, the authors suggest, can be learned, practiced and cultivated through self examination-and-compassion, mindfulness and gratitude, all practices that the desert Christians understood well and all practices that we have been exploring here in so many ways as we seek together to claim the deepest truth of who we really are – beloved children of God; and what the world is really about—gift, sheer gift, and what’s a gift if it isn’t shared?

In African wisdom there is a concept called *Ubuntu*, which is sometimes translated “I in you and you in me.” It is the essence of being a person, according to African bishop Desmond Tutu, who claims that “A self-sufficient human being is subhuman.” “(Ubuntu) means that we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence... when you have ubuntu, you embrace others. You are generous, compassionate....(and) this is God's dream.”

Humility—being (or becoming) real, and hospitality—being (or becoming) open—to others, to the world within and around us, open to the Spirit of love are inseparable. The more we open ourselves to the other, the more we become who God is inviting us to become. It’s an invitation; its a (never-ending) process; it’s a practice, it’s a journey, and it’s a party. Bring on the cookies. There is work to be done.