

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 29, 2010 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Isaiah 57:15-21 and Luke 14:1,7-14

JOCKEYING FOR POSITION

“They were watching him closely.” Jesus has been invited to dinner but is not among friends. There is antagonism at the table. His dining companions are alert to signs of trouble, ready to take offense at him. Jesus is watching them, also – observing their behavior just beneath the surface of their pleasantries and social graces. Jesus speaks of a wedding banquet, and many who have planned large wedding receptions know the difficulty of seating arrangements. There may be relatives who should not be seated at the same table. We can’t seat Aunt PrimAndProper anywhere near Uncle Boisterous. There may not be enough seats at a table of friends to include some “lesser” members of the group who are sure to feel left out. Human beings seem almost instinctively to recognize rankings and so to sense exclusion in their placement.

When in the Apostles’ Creed we say Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father, we are not suggesting they are literally seated upon thrones; we are indicating prominence at the banquet which symbolizes the end of God’s conflict with evil and the joyous celebration of new life governed by God’s love and mercy. Because he gave himself willingly and faithfully to suffering, humiliation, and death for our sake – because God loves us too much to let us go our own ways to death and oblivion – Jesus is raised to the highest position, represented by his being seated at God’s right hand.

The last has been made first. Crucifixion was designed as a cruel public shaming. The Romans’ purpose was to display the rebel writhing, screaming, and cursing in helpless rage prolonged into despair for all to see. It is decidedly *as the crucified one* who gave himself to such humiliation that Jesus is raised and honored by God. As the one who humbled himself for sake of all who are shamed, he is exalted. All our false pride at being more important than others dies with him, and all our shame at being less than others dies with him, too.

Jesus’ comments about wedding guests jockeying for position might be heard at the level of mere social advice. If you want to avoid embarrassment and leave open the possibility of favor in the eyes of all gathered, don’t put yourself in a prominent position. Take one of the lower seats. Then, if nothing changes, you won’t be shamed, and you can enjoy the meal in comfort. If, however, your host, upon seeing where you are seated, decides

a change is in order, he will call for your advancement, and you will be honored. As social advice, Jesus' recommendation is neither controversial nor profound. Young social climbers are likely to be too eager to sit near the boss, which can prove to be an embarrassing mistake. The savvy sit where they can be seen but not resented. Understate yourself and your importance, so you can be advanced rather than degraded. Better to be called to move up than be told to move down.

What Jesus does, of course, is embarrass the social climbers by exposing their game, which everybody sees anyway. The other guests are already saying silently to themselves, "Look who thinks he's important. I wonder if he'll get away with it." We human beings are very observant of each other's social behavior, body language, posturing, inflections, and facial expressions. Children can sometimes tell when two grownups are in love, even when the lovers think they are hiding their infatuation. Subordinates kissing up to the boss may imagine their behavior goes unrecognized by their coworkers. The would-be proud who just drop into the conversation what they think is a neutral comment about the source of their pride might be surprised at how readily everyone recognizes what they are doing.

But Jesus' social advice is really a parable designed to move us from seeing the obvious to recognizing the concealed. We call it "the argument from lesser to greater." *If you see the truth in the lesser (often obvious) situation, then open your eyes and your mind a little wider and see that truth in the greater concern, in the hidden ways of God.* I doubt very much that Jesus really cared about the seating arrangement at a wedding banquet, but he cares very much about the way you and I position ourselves toward God and other people, and he cares *why* we put ourselves in this position or that one. How I see myself relative to God and others matters very, very much.

We have a problem here: the word "humble" with our understandings of what it means. Somehow we need to break humility free from the view of it as weak, pathetic, and self-hating. Jesus is not asking us to despise ourselves, become submissive little shrinking violets, or regard ourselves as worthless in relation to God or other people. He does not call us to become toadies – not to supposedly superior people and not to God, either, because God does not need that kind of adoration. Jesus is asking us to accept and affirm *our humanity* and stop seeking ways to elevate ourselves above other people, to stop jockeying for position. Humanity is created for a round table because from God's point of view, it is a family table around which sibling rivalry has gotten way, way out of control, with oppressive and murderous results. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, we human beings are sisters and brothers because *who we are rightfully and truly as our real and valid selves* is determined by our relationship with God, acknowledged or unacknowledged. The jealous, shame-filled murder of Abel by his brother Cain is the story of the human race. Listen today to all the angry, irrational voices screaming hatred to divide the family and make some sisters

and brothers not our own, to label them “other” and deny them places at the table. Cain and Abel. Birmingham and Auschwitz, Dresden and New York on 9-11, Darfur and the “other-izing” of our own President, mocking Christians and slandering Muslims, killing, torturing, excluding, degrading, shaming. All of it comes together on the cross where relationship with God and each other is denied, mocked, and killed.

As we gather here to worship God, land is being grabbed from earth’s poorest people under the pretense of development. It seems fertile land in desperately poor countries is the latest commodity that can be bought at bargain-basement prices in huge parcels with the promise of returning ten to twenty percent on investments. It’s the replacement for the housing market bubble, and the victims are the world’s poorest people. In exchange, they are sent food aid, along with the guarantee that now they will need food aid as far as we can see into the future, and their own governments are selling them out to the investors. Such a thing could not happen unless some people regarded themselves as more than human while seeing others as less than human. Humility is not a matter of feeling bad about myself but, rather, a matter of feeling good about myself as the human creature I truly am – loved by God and granted a seat at the round table of the human family where none is greater or less than the others because the only real prominence comes from self-denying service for love of the others.

Understanding the parable Jesus draws from the game of social climbing challenges both our low opinions of ourselves and our high opinions of ourselves. God did not create us for either. We are not made to grovel; neither are we made to strut. There are no small people, lesser people, insignificant people, hoi polloi, workers, peasants, campesinos – not at God’s round family table where Jesus calls us to gather with him as sisters and brothers.

What is at stake is the newness of humanity in God’s desire to “make all things new.” I am sure that many people, if they heard what I am saying in this sermon, would think, “So Jesus wants us to pretend we’re all equally important in this world?” No, he wants us to stop pretending some of us are more important to God and to the human family than others so we start treating people as sisters and brothers, not as lessers to be used and abused.

Let not the wise take pride in their wisdom,
the powerful in their strength to command,
or the wealthy in their riches with all the privilege they buy.
Let those who take pride, take it in this:
That they understand and know me, that I am the LORD God.
I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on the earth,
for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

Amen.