

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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The Kingdom of God is like a Banquet

I. Why does seating matter?

Sometimes your best efforts still fall flat and undermine your self-worth.

Where we find our self-worth and how that shapes our capacity to experience of the kingdom of God is what I want to talk about today.

Today's Gospel tells of when Jesus attended a dinner party hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. The guests are all concerned with status, with hierarchy. Where you sat at the table signified something about you, about your importance. It still does, doesn't it?

Formal dinners aren't perhaps as common today as they were in first century Palestine or in the era of Downton Abbey. But everywhere you look, there are other signifiers of worth we think about and obsess over. Things like clothes, cars, neighborhoods, professions. Often our satisfaction with a paycheck depends not on whether it suffices for our needs for food, shelter, and clothing, but on how my check compares your check.

What is it that creates such angst in us over these things? Why are they so important? "Seating arrangements" matter because we use them to communicate status and personal worth. To possess an inferior seat, a less desirable neighborhood, or a lower paycheck is to be slighted, to have your value as a person called into question, to feel shame. We form our opinions of others, and of ourselves, according to where we are "seated."

All of these signifiers speak to one of our oldest, deepest demons: the specter of self-worth.

II. Jesus' Good News

As Jesus reclines at table in the Pharisee's house, he watches the guests jockey for position. When Jesus opens his mouth, he begins with an ancient piece of Hebrew Wisdom, a passage his hearers would all know, lifted directly from the book of Proverbs:

*In the presence of the king do not give yourself airs,
do not take a place among the great;
better to be invited, 'Come up here',
than be humiliated in the presence of the prince. (Prov 25.6-7 NJB)*

Then, as is his wont, Jesus takes this advice and turns it up to 11. Jesus loved Spinal Tap.

Jesus, all the time, takes Hebrew scripture, considers God's intent, and invites his hearers to radical, new, full-hearted obedience that makes sense of life in the here and now. At the Pharisee's house, Jesus says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

In other words, Jesus says, not only can you not manipulate your way into a place of prominence in the kingdom of God: the whole concept of prominence or status is being turned on its head! Because in the kingdom of God we derive our value not from temporary signifiers, like the location of our office or the size of our pickup truck, but we derive our value from the one and eternal God who loves us and gave himself for us.

III. Application today

This is both good news... and it is not! You and I have worked long years to achieve the status we enjoy today, and Jesus is summarily dismissing all that effort with a sweep of his hand. He's saying I have to let go of one way of evaluating status and self-worth before I will be at liberty to grasp on to a different one. If this doesn't sound attractive to you right away, that's OK. Freedom is hard, scary, uncomfortable work.

But every time I am tempted to emphasize the difference between myself and others in order to distinguish myself from others, I quite literally "dis-grace" myself. I remove myself from the reign of God's kingdom, the reign of grace, and subject myself to the bondage of less benevolent masters, to those very lies of Satan that Doyt talked about last week.

On the other hand, if I can be content wherever I am seated at the table, if my identity is secure and I always find myself seated among people worthy of my love and respect and deference, that is freedom: I have reached the goal: the kingdom of God is here!

Of course, I'm speaking hypothetically, here: I'm still working on that one. :-)

That is why Jesus offers a practical action plan designed to re-orient your life, turn it up to 11, as you live into the kingdom of God. Jesus says, When you host a meal for others (or enter into any social encounter), invite someone who is different from you in some meaningful way, someone who will be surprised and honored by your invitation.

What will happen then?

First, the very invitation will be a spiritual discipline. You are choosing, before God and neighbor, to perceive someone's value through the lenses of the kingdom of God rather than through more conventional cultural lenses. This is called hospitality and it is good news to the person you invite.

Second, visiting with those different from oneself is a learning, stretching opportunity that leads directly to the kingdom of God. Let me finish with a story.

One couple I met in the Bronx was Yao & Evelyn. They were from Togo, West Africa, only recently come to the U.S.. We had them over, and Becky worked hard to prepare a delicious lasagna and fresh-baked cake. Yao and Evelyn picked at the food, but really didn't eat any of it. It turned out the lasagna was too rich with lots of meat and cheese and sweet tomato sauce. And the cake was also too sweet, with its thick layer of icing. There's nothing moderate or subtle about the way we do sugar in the U.S.. Yao and Evelyn couldn't stomach our food: it was simply inedible for them. We wanted to be hospitable and we were making our best effort... but the food part wasn't working out so well.

A couple weeks after the lasagna fiasco, Yao and Evelyn invited us over to their apartment for dinner. They served a rich delicacy of their own: fish heads and fufu. Fufu is this white, pasty stuff made from ground cassava. It's like mashed potatoes but even worse. The fish heads... still had the eyes in them.

I'm not an adventurous eater. At Yao and Evelyn's house that night I ate lots of fufu. I ate all the meat I could find on that fish head. But the eye balls: I did not eat.

Shared meals turned out not to be something that drew our families together. Instead we would get together to play games, to pray and study scripture, and to share life with life. Thus we were able to walk with them through some challenging medical issues.

Visiting with Yao and Evelyn, at their home and at mine, helped me to live into a bigger world, to glimpse new perspectives, to gain a little more understanding of what the kingdom of God really looks like. It helped me to encounter a greater slice of reality. This kind of hospitality is an opportunity for an explosive expansion of God's kingdom in my life and in yours.

Because it turns out that life in God's kingdom isn't all milk and honey. It can also involve fish heads and fufu.... Yao and Evelyn enlarged my understanding of the kingdom of God, as I did theirs. And since that kingdom continues its work around us, in us, and through us each day, we each continue to be shaped, molded, and brought towards the completion of God's work in us. That is the kingdom that gives each of us a worth and a value that cannot be diminished and will never be taken away.

Questions:

1. What props (artifacts or social interactions) do you use to elevate your own personal status or value?
2. How might you think or act differently if you were free from dependence upon those props?
3. What practical steps could you take to wrest yourself away from slavery to ego props in your life?