

## “Humility in Hospitality”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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In developing this sermon, one of the issues, concerns, or ideas which confronted me was that the writer of Luke was a woman. Now while that isn't necessarily shocking, it may cause you as it did me a bit of difficulty. My Biblical understanding from an early age encouraged me to think of the Gospel writers as four males named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are fine male names and it makes sense that a book named or attributed to one of these would have been written by a male. However, there seems to be a bit of evidence based on material unique to Luke which makes the idea of female authorship at least reasonable. This includes the unique Lukan references to Mary's interior life, the moment of “quickenings” during Mary's pregnancy, the role of women in supporting the disciples, and other recognition of the importance of women not found in other gospels.

And then there is the issue of meals! Luke's gospel uses meals as a central symbol of hospitality and especially a symbol of Luke's belief in the Kingdom of God and its attributes. Sharing a meal, sitting at table, even the order of the seating – all are for Luke symbols of how God's Kingdom will be known and/or enjoyed. The banquet symbolizes the welcoming and inclusive nature of the Kingdom and challenges the notion that only a chosen few will have the opportunity to enjoy such. While for men of the first century, hospitality and meals would be important, they hardly seem key symbols of the Kingdom or of God's reign. Yet for the women of the day, meals would have been a central part of lives as they would be in charge of their preparation and serving. For Luke meals are places where faith is lived out and, remember the road to Emmaus story, where the resurrected Jesus is first recognized. And today we read of the meal as a time for egalitarianism of faith to be practiced.

Our periscope utilizes the symbolism of a meal as informing one of how the reign of God will be known. Now whether one wants to believe that Luke is speaking of a kingdom to be realized as a community of the day, a community of the future following an eschatological in breaking, or an “other worldly” place to be enjoyed after one's earthly death, Luke seems to be emphasizing a faith which will call forth a challenge to the expected and the everyday. What we've read today is part of a three part +chapter which offers a challenge to religious and social mores of the day. In the verses which are skipped in our pericope, Luke's Jesus challenges the notion that healing on the Sabbath is taboo as such ignores the real situations of life which do not fit easily into an ideology or theology that is so divorced from everyday life. It's important to remember that all work was to be ceased on the Sabbath (sundown Friday to Sundown Saturday) and such religious acts as healing or even the saving of an animal or child from drowning is frowned upon. Yet, in the first seven verses of this Chapter, Luke's Jesus, in the clear view of religious representatives of the day – Pharisees, foments a miraculous healing of a man with “dropsy”. It's a story which is really sort of rude in that the explanation or excuse doesn't really fit the act. The man isn't drowning nor is he a child of Jesus. He's sick but the story doesn't imply that he's in imminent danger of dying. Jesus simply heals him as an object lesson in how absurd religious legalism can be, I guess.

Our pericope or passage then follows and is a challenge to the egotism and social decorum of the day. AND it's also a blueprint for subverting of that decorum through manipulation! Read it and you can find there a means for social climbing through the manipulation of others expectations! The story tells us that if one is invited to a party, a dinner party to make sure to take the least powerful place at the table. One shouldn't seek to rank oneself as above others but rather seek to allow the host to determine if one's humble selection was correct. In doing so, one may find that one is offered the honor of a better seat of more social import or worth. On the surface, this seems to be a very strange idea for Jesus to be offering – a way of living out our faith which manipulates others to do our bidding? I might speculate that, if Luke were a woman and recognizing the very low status of women, this advice might be seen as a means of encouraging women to consider Christianity as an alternative to other religions. What if this advice, it really can't be called a parable, were a means to encourage the very undercutting of the social mores of the time that is to subvert the social sexism of the day? For it does seem to say to women that this Jesus embodied a God who cared about them and wanted them to be free of the oppressive social mores which bound them to certain roles, very humble roles. And the means for subverting such is to challenge their absurdity by being even more humble. In addition, it also says that given the opportunity even those who are seen as the oppressors, the ones who maintain and benefit from the situation, they will and act out in a just and liberating way if given the opportunity. What a radical, meaning root, response of non-violence to this oppressive time. Some 1900 or so years later, Gandhi and King will encourage their followers to act in a similar manner as they accept the consequences of their own humble acts of non-violent resistance. Such non-violence celebrates and holds up the humanity of all as they participate in these situations. The hope and promise of faith is that that humanity will enable the actors to treat each other with justice and with love. It is the message of the resurrection where God's radical love of humanity overcomes our inability to confront its embodiment and it is the promise of faith in Jesus as Christ that all are children of God and deserve such love even as we struggle to understand and live that out.

So what does that mean to us, in 2010, in Madison? First, I believe it reminds us that non-violence is the believer's calling. It is to a response to our faith to live in as non-violent a manner as possible. The humility of faith calls us to treat the other with the respect, love, and joy which we expect for ourselves. Now that may sound esoteric but I think it's less so. Such a living out of faith engenders a kind of self-confidence and self-love which doesn't require that we remind everybody of who or what we are. It is humility of faith which accepts the notion that God calls all people and if given the opportunity that all people can and will respond to God's call to such a life-style. And it is not that self-defense or protection is outlawed. It is that one of the risks of faith is to allow the other to accept us as we are and not foist upon them an image or idea of who we might be. Humility as proposed in Luke means allowing the host to define us and in doing so demanding of the host that he or she accept our humanity as we accept her or his. And now the most troubling part of this story for me – what if we are called to recognize that we are not the host or hostess but the guest? What if our role in life is to be the one who is invited to participate but isn't the one defining who else is invited or where they sit. We know we have always in all we do lived as the host, the hostess, the ones who are in charge. That's what it means to be human. But what if the call is to live as the humble guest? How does that change how we live, how we treat one another, how we interact with nature? What if we become the humble guest as a result of our faith and not the host or hostess?

Alright not having said that, I also have to acknowledge that part of being the humble guest is a recognition and an acceptance of history. We can't suddenly say well from now on I will live as a guest of God in the world and not as one who controls and defines others as a hostess or host. History is real. Think about it this way for a moment. I have a friend who put an addition on his house, actually their house. When they did this they wanted a rain garden of native Wisconsin plants. Now we all know that if it weren't for history, we could simply plow up an area and wait a few months and VOILA a garden of native plants would appear! But we know that won't happen. To do that will invite all sorts of what we call invasive species to appear \and they'll take over! No to get a native e plant garden one needs to plant such species and nurture them for a while! History has meant that native species require human cultivation.

My point is that to be people of a faith which is humble and honest is to be a people who live within history and within the constraints such history engenders. It is to live as a people who celebrate and hold fast to the commitment of the humanity of others. And it is to admit our history and to live within it. It is to accept that our faith calls us to be humble guests whose baggage requires us to examine and think about how that history has affected others. It is to live out a faith which calls us to embrace the other as other and yet also to celebrate their humanity. It is to recognize our role as guests and to seek to develop a faith which grows from a conversation that includes new immigrant and children of immigrants of years gone by, black, brown, red, and white, women and men, gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight folk, all who seek to build a world of joy, hope, pleasure, and peace. It is to celebrate the joy, hope, pleasure, and peace of a God who lives among and with us, who calls us to be the humble guests as we seek to build communities which embody such faith. May we be the humble guests of faith. AMEN.