

Ken Arthur  
Phoenix Community Church  
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## Our Place At The Table

Sirach 10:12-18  
Luke 14:1,7-14

The gospel reading for today is an interesting little story. Interesting mainly because one has to wonder what we're supposed to get out of it...

- Is Jesus really telling us where to sit at dinner parties?
- And who to invite when we host our own parties?
- Is Jesus really telling us to worry about issues of status and how to store up brownie points for a later time after our life on earth?

Because on the surface, that seems to be the case.

But the first part of the reading, instructions on where to sit to get the best status boost, is specifically called a parable. So, I think it is safe to assume that this is not entirely literal.

It may or may not be good advice when attending a dinner party, but if it's a parable, then it also has some bigger meaning.

So what is this story supposed to be telling us?

We can certainly see in the reading a statement about pride and humility... About working for reward and recognition versus letting go and accepting what comes.

Perhaps it is telling us that selfishly striving for honors isn't what life is about – but if we act out of love and don't worry about recognition, then although recognition may

or may not come anyway, it won't matter because that isn't what we are supposed to be about.

And as we think about pride and humility we might first try to define what they are. The dictionary offers us several definitions, some with bad connotations, some with good connotations.

Pride can mean conceit or disdain. It can be a selfish thing, an over abundance of inappropriate “I'm better than everyone else” feelings.

But pride can also be appropriate self esteem, a justifiable self-respect. One definition the dictionary gives is delight from an act, possession or relationship.

And so pride, like so many other things in this world, can be quite a good thing if encountered in appropriate moderation. It would seem ok, for example, to take delight in your accomplishments and the people that you love.

I think pride meaning self-esteem, recognizing that you are a worthy, loved child of God, is a very good thing.

That is what we do when we hold gay pride events. We're not saying gay people are better than others. Quite the opposite.

We are challenging those who would make less of GLBT people to boost their own image of self-worth. We are reminding them that GLBT people are also human beings worthy of dignity and self respect - loved children of God.

What I think this parable is warning us against is letting our pride run away with us. Don't become so full of pride that all that matters is making sure your pride is further fueled with the praise of others.

Praise can be nice as it lets us know that what we're doing is benefiting others in some way. It can be hard to keep working on something if you're not sure it is doing any good in the world.

But if all we're working for is praise...

- If we regret doing something we know was good and necessary because we weren't praised or recognized for it...
- If we've let our pride run away...
- If we've plopped ourselves down at the head of the table and are selfishly demanding the recognition we need to hide or beef up low self-esteem...

then perhaps we need to stop and reflect on our motivations.

We see similar thoughts on pride in the book of Sirach as well.

Sirach was written sometime prior to 180 BCE and is classified as a wisdom book, like Proverbs, which you might be more familiar with.

It is part of what we know as the Apocrypha, which is very simply a collection of books that are considered "official" or canonical by some parts of Christianity but not by most Protestants.

Sirach, for example, is included as part of the "old testament" by Catholics and Orthodox Christians, but not by Protestants. Nor is it an official part of the scriptures of Judaism. But the fact it is not a canonical part of Protestant scripture doesn't mean it shouldn't be taken seriously.

This selection from Sirach, in fact, has some interesting things to say about pride. It says that pride begins with stubbornness in a turning away from God.

I like this because Sirach seems to use sin and turning away from God synonymously. I think this is a good way to think of sin. Pride is a sin, a turning from God.

And in turning from God in pride, one turns inward to oneself, thinking that you are all that you need. That you can handle everything on your own.

And Sirach says, maybe a little melodramatically, that this approach is going to fail. Kind of like our kid's story about Lola the Whale where she thought she could handle her bad breath on her own and not only she couldn't but it caused her all kinds of other problems in her relationships with her friends.

And, although I would not claim that God purposefully brings ruin to the prideful like Sirach does, perhaps we might say, however, that the natural outcome of thinking you're so good that you don't need help – that you don't need even God - is probably going to lead to trouble.

Sirach tells us the proud will fall and the humble will be raised up. Very similar, indeed, to what Jesus is saying when he says those "who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Of course on the flip side of pride, is humility or humbleness. The dictionary defines humble as not proud or arrogant; in a spirit of deference; down-to-earth, modest, unassuming, unpretentious.

But do not confuse humbleness with low self-esteem. Despite the definition of the word, I think to be truly humble one needs a certain amount of pride in oneself,

but this is the pride – the delight - that comes with self-esteem, with recognizing your inherent worth as a loved child of God.

It is knowing that you are worthy and loved, no matter what, that makes the striving for honors and recognition irrelevant. Praise is nice and sometimes praise is necessary, but praise confirms what you should already know – that God has blessed your life.

We can certainly try to find appropriate pride and appropriate humbleness in our personal lives, but can we apply all this talk about pride and humility to our relationship with God?

I was struck that Jesus specifically puts this parable in the context of a wedding banquet and that elsewhere he also uses a wedding banquet to describe the kin-dom of God. So I began to wonder a little bit if this parable might also be a reflection of what the realm of God is supposed to be like.

Perhaps we are also being told not only a lesson about pride and humility but that humility is the best way to be about God's business, the best way to a close relationship with God, the best way to be in the realm of God.

We can't be at one with God if we are only worried about getting on God's good side. We need to come to God humbly, secure in God' love, open to whatever may come.

And while we're talking about the realm of God, this is probably a good point to talk briefly about Jesus' statement in the second half of tonight's reading where he says that we should be dining with the oppressed and disenfranchised - those who can't afford to pay us back - so that we will be rewarded at the "resurrection of the just."

Jesus advises how to "navigate" the social scene in the first part of his speech and then turns the social scene completely on its head in his follow up statement.<sup>1</sup>

As I've talked about in the past, I understand talk of the end times and the kin-dom of God as talk of what it would mean if we lived completely in the love of God in the here and now. That the realm of God, and in this instance, the resurrection of the just, is what we are to be working for here in this day.

One way to understand Jesus' statement is to realize that the repayment or reward that Jesus is talking about "is a risen life freed from addictions to power, privilege or status, [and] not something we can deposit in a bank account or hang on our walls."<sup>2</sup>

Our repayment for living humble lives, lives that challenge inappropriate social conventions, that give honor to the oppressed and disenfranchised, is not a resurrection in an after-life, but a renewal or resurrection in this life.

We might also ask what this parable says about our relationships with each other. It is interesting to consider the parable by putting yourself into the role of the host. How do we treat those who are metaphorically sitting at our table - those we encounter in our lives?

Do we privilege and recognize those who push themselves to the front of our table, so to speak?

Do we notice those who stay back?

If nothing else, perhaps this parable is a call to consider who we give privilege to in our lives and who we don't and why.

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1 Jeannine K. Brown at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=8/29/2010#tab4](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/29/2010#tab4)

2 <http://www.hrc.org/scripture/index.asp?page=09-02-07>

And I think that applies to us as church as well.  
Who do we notice and why?  
Do we tend to privilege certain people?  
Do we praise and recognize only those who seem to demand it?  
Do we remember those who tend to stay out of the limelight?  
Might this also be an issue of welcome?  
Do we accept only those in our inner circle?  
Do we go to those on the fringe of our community and invite them to the front?  
And if we reflect on any of those questions and are disturbed by the answers, then what do we do about it?

But life is not so simple as turning the tables or changing places,  
not so simple as moving the humble up to take the place of the prideful,  
not so simple as taking power from the oppressors and giving it to the oppressed.

As one commentator notes... "If we do not pay attention to the systemic ways some of us are placed on the margins, we remain addicted to a system that always demeans someone."<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to change systems, to change society to a place where people are valued because they are worthy children of God and not by what favors they can return.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the question of who we privilege, the simple qualities of pride and humility can also apply to a group such as a church as well as to individuals.

As a church community we do not want to be inappropriately prideful, to think we are better than others.  
But we want a healthy pride, a healthy self-esteem.  
To know that we are loved children of God.  
That we have a message to offer to the world.  
That message doesn't make us better than others, but it does mean that we have an important part to play in bringing God's light and love to the world.

And it is our message of God's love that we need to concentrate on and do so humbly. Rewards and recognitions should not be the motivation for us as individuals nor should it be motivation for us as a church.

But, once more, let us also not corporately confuse humility with low self-esteem. We sometimes lament the fact that we are a small group or make jokes when we don't sing quite as well as we would like to.

And it's ok, I think, to wish we were bigger or to want to sing more pleasingly but let us not ever apologize for who we are or let such things make it seem we are somehow defective or not worthy.

We are all worthy, loved children of God. God is in this place right here and now and has given us a purpose in this world.

So let us take our place at the table, with humility but also assured of God's love.  
Let us help realize the realm of God in this world where all people are valued.  
Let us take the message of God's love into the world, following the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/scripture/index.asp?page=09-02-07>

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