

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/28/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, August 28th

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Status versus humility

The Gospel lection this week centers around the third recorded time that Jesus accepts an invitation to dine with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-43). On this occasion, it is a ruler of the Pharisees. While the Pharisees who were present at the banquet watch Jesus carefully, Jesus observes the behavior of the guests as they jostle to seat themselves in places of honor. This leads to a parable about the path to true exaltation being through humility. The second part of the pericope emphasizes the radical generosity in which Jesus' disciples ought to behave to those less fortunate - to give and expect no reward. This wisdom of humility and generosity not only have implications for this life but for the final judgment.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

The first part of this pericope, the parable of the wedding feast, is directed to the guests at the banquet ("those who were invited"):

¹ *One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.*

⁷ *Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in 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 table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

It is helpful here to understand the social system in place during Jesus' time. It was a system of patronage, where honor and favors were the currency. Favors owed to a benefactor enhanced the benefactor's social standing. Mealtime was often the place where status was on display. Guests of honor sat near the host. If you were less important, you sat farther away. If you didn't matter at all, you weren't even invited.

A wedding feast would be more formal than most meals, but comparison would still apply to any banquet. As guests arrive at different times, those who attempt to secure a place of honor in the seating hierarchy run the risk

of being asked to move should a more distinguished guest arrive later. In a culture where such social hierarchy was so important, imagine the shame that would befall a guest when publicly asked to move to a position of lower status. It is far better to take a lower position in the first place and be invited to take a higher position (compare Proverbs 25:7).

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v.11) is also seen in Luke 18:14 and Matthew 23:12 and is consistent with Matthew 18:4 and 1 Peter 5:6. Jesus Himself not only taught this but lived it (succinctly captured in Philippians 2:5-11).

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Jesus now has some advice for the host. Invite those unable to return the favor - *the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*. The Kingdom has different rules. Social conventions of patronage and reciprocity do not apply. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. In the Kingdom, all are invited and every seat is a place of honor.

Reflections

There is a tendency to discount the status-conscious behavior of the guests at the banquet, particularly that of the Pharisees, as an artifact of first century Jewish religion and culture. Yet today in our world it is possible for a visitor to enter almost any church and immediately identify "elite members" in a given congregation by where they are sitting. To illustrate this point, a congregational seating map is a standard part of a formal congregational assessment process used by church consultants. The idea of status is something that appears to be hardwired into who we are. Evolutionary psychologists point out this same trait in our nearest cousins (the hierarchies within the social groups of the various primates). Creationists point to the idea that God created order in His creation and ordained authority structures. It is interesting to note that in this lectionary text Jesus does not argue against the notion of hierarchy and privilege. His argument is more about the responsibilities that come with such hierarchy and privilege - the mindset of humility and the opportunity to use privilege to bless those without such.

Unlike a traditional organizational hierarchy, every member of the body of Christ has a personal relationship with Christ. There are no spiritual hierarchies. The Holy Spirit has given each member a unique set of spiritual gifts to build up the body and play a unique role. Some of these gifts are valued differently by the world. In addition, in order to administrate the visible church in good order, human forms of organization are required within the various churches, denominations and ministries. Hierarchies therefore exist even within the church. Rather than be concerned about status, we are accountable to God to fulfill our calling and use the gifts we have been given in order to be the person we are called to be. No matter the nature of our calling, we are all one in Christ. Humility is thus when we use our talents and capabilities under God's direction and leading, giving Him the honor and glory for what is accomplished in and through our lives.