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Luke 14:1, 7-14

GROUNDED

Has Jesus become the new Miss Manners? From the scripture reading today, it sure sounds like Jesus is giving etiquette advice, with his instructions for how people should behave at a social gathering. Jesus tells the guests who are jockeying for the best seats at a dinner party: don't take the seats of honor in case the host should embarrass you by asking you to give up that seat for someone more prestigious than yourself. Instead, Jesus advises the guests to sit at a lower seat and then they will be pleasantly surprised should the host invite them to take a more honored seat.

And then Jesus turns to the host and offers instructions about who should be on the guest list. Don't just invite those who are able to reciprocate, Jesus tells the host. But instead invite those who have no ability to repay your generosity. While these instructions may sound like lessons in social manners, Jesus is really teaching us about something far more profound. Jesus is offering wisdom about how we can correctly understand ourselves and our relationship with others. Jesus is teaching us about humility.

We tend to misunderstand what is meant by "humility." Humility is not thinking poorly of yourself. When someone compliments you about that meal you cooked or your gifts as a wonderful musician or teacher or attorney or artist, humility is not about denying your abilities. Just say "thank you," and accept the compliment. Humility is not about having false modesty. In fact, there is nothing false about humility because humility is about having an honest

understanding of yourself and your relationship with others. Humility is having an *honest* understanding of yourself and your relationship with others.

The word *humility* and the word *human* both share the same Latin root word *humus*. *Humus* means “ground, earth, soil.” Thus, to be human is to be “of the earth.” To have humility is to be a person who is “grounded.”

Humility means we remember and embrace our earthiness—that we are grounded in who we are. We are the Creature, not the Creator.

But we humans do not like to stay “grounded.” We seek all manner of ways to elevate ourselves, to exalt ourselves, to rise above others, because we don’t always have such a high regard for our shared earthiness. We want to be better than all those other earth-bound shmucks. And so we try to rise above all the rest. We seek honor. We seek privilege. We seek status. We regard our accomplishments or our fortunate life circumstances or the privileges afforded to us by our bank account or the color of our skin or our higher education as indicators that we are superior to others. We may not always acknowledge these feelings of superiority, but they worm their way into our thinking and our choices and our behaviors.

And when we are honest, I think we resist being grounded in our humanity because we also want to be better than what lies within ourselves. If we are better than others, then we might feel better about ourselves and we won’t have to face what is broken or flawed within ourselves. Our earthiness is a messy, sometimes stinky condition, we seek to transcend—to rise above.

Did you ever take a walk in a soggy woodland or maybe through a marshland and smelled that pungent odor of rotting leaves and plants? That earthy smell of rotting plant debris is not a pleasant odor. And yet, while we may wish to escape its unpleasantness, there is something very essential taking place among that rotting odor. It is the odor of new life.

Some years ago, we had a garden center deliver a load of mulch to our house. After this delivery, I came out of the house one morning to discover a disgusting sight in one of the flower beds. Right in the middle of the flower bed was a revolting pile of yellow goop. My first thought was that a neighbor's dog had thrown up in our yard. Instead, what I learned was that it was called "slime mold" and instead of being something horrific, it was in fact evidence that the mulch was filled with an abundance of rich organic life.

We are people of the earth, and we earthy people dwell in muck and grime and messiness. But God loves this earth. And God loves us in all our earthiness. God sees something beautiful, something of great potential in us, messy beings of the earth. In Jesus, God came and lived among us to teach us and guide us not so that we can *transcend* our earthiness, but so something new and rich might grow out of our messiness and we might live more fully into our humanity. Jesus doesn't teach us to transcend our humanity but to live as fully human, letting God birth new life from within us and our disorder.

Humility begins with an acceptance of our own earthiness. We ourselves are imperfect. Bits and pieces of muck and goo cling to us. And yet we are loved. And we stand, not above others, but shoulder to shoulder with everyone else and their earthiness. And understanding this opens us to a changed relationship with everyone we meet.

In the parable Jesus tells, he instructs the host not to invite relatives and rich neighbors to a social event with the expectation they will reciprocate, but rather to invite the poor and the disabled and the people who have absolutely no ability to repay the generosity. The generosity Jesus instructs the host to offer is rooted in humility. Generosity is extended, not out of pity for others—because pity is a top-down response shown to people we think are lesser than ourselves. Rather, Jesus' instructions are rooted in compassion. Compassion literally means "to suffer

with” others. Compassion, unlike pity, arises from humility. We are *with* those people who are suffering or struggling. We are equal to them. We are one of them. Their plight could be and sometimes is *our* plight.

In the parable Jesus tells, the generosity took the form of a dinner invitation. But generosity born out of humility can take many forms. It can take the form of forgiveness because we too understand our own need to be forgiven. It can take the form of offering someone a second chance because we too stand in need of second chances. Generosity born from humility could be the gift of a scholarship, a gift card, a job offer. Generosity born from humility could be a social policy toward welcoming immigrants, a tax break for low income people, an acknowledgement of wrong doing and reparations to mend the injustice.

The parable Jesus tells about the dinner party reminds us that we are perpetual guests. We are guests on this earth. We are guests to this life. We are always on the receiving end of God’s generosity. And knowing this humbles us. Knowing this, grounds us. Knowing this enables us to live in right relationship with one another.

The cross can be seen as a symbol for how we are to live our Christian faith in humility before God and our neighbor. There is the vertical line—reminding us that we are creatures and not the Creator, summoning us to live in right relationship with God. And there is the horizontal line—summoning us to live in right relationship with one another.

The Christian faith is one of many paradoxes. Jesus tells us that dying we will find life. He tells us that the last will be first and the first will be last. He tells us that whoever wants to be great must be a servant to others. And today Jesus offers us yet one more paradox: those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

And so, with all the pieces of our earthiness clinging to us, we live the paradox. If we desire to rise, we do so by staying grounded in our humanity, living among one another in humility.