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Luke 14:1, 7-14

(Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16)

**Table Wisdom**

“*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers…do not neglect to do good and to share what you have…*” (Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Epistle text for today)

We live in a society where social recognition and prestige; social standing, are normative measures by which we assess people. House sizes, cars we drive, shoes we wear, clothes we put on our bodies, which social clubs we belong too, salaries, educational background (Where did you go to school?), (where you worship!); are all ways which we as a society assess people, constantly; often without consciousness.

This is not anything new. Societies have always been structured this way. I think it is part of being human and living. Education has always been a social yardstick. Who your family was has been another. Where did you live, where did you grow up? In Richmond, did you grow up north or south of the river — (we didn’t date from south of the river when I was growing up).

*I grew up in poverty on the edge of a golf course. I saw how people lived on the other side of the tracks, the upper crust and the WASPs at the country club. We had chickens and pigs in our yards. We butchered every year. I'll never forget those things.*

Arnold Palmer

Where we grew up societally has affected all of us.

Our nation as a whole is moving somewhat away from this measurement, but in smaller communities like Louisa, it still remains. So and so is related to so and so — and (even if they are a scoundrel), “It is okay because we knew his momma and daddy”(which is different for those folks who are just come hitherers — grace is rarely extended to those folks as easily).

Societal segregation based on one reason or another, is not new phenomena. It was not new is Jesus’ day either. In the Gospel account today, Jesus goes to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, and…”they were watching him closely.” (Luke 14: 1)

Religious leaders watching the new guy on the Sabbath closely at a meal was probably not anything new.

Verses 2-6 are absent from our lectionary reading. In those verses there is an account of another sabbath healing that Jesus performed, similar to the one from last weeks’ text in that Jesus calls out the religious leaders (he doesn’t call them hypocrites like he did last week-but he does ask them again, “Which one of you does not pull your ox out of a well on the sabbath if he needs it?”). This time, the leaders were silent. Jesus healed a man with dropsy. And it says, “They could not reply to this.”

I am not sure of the reasons why verses 2-6 are absent from our lectionary reading. I mention it because I think it is important to understand the text-Jesus was busy in his ministry teaching the religious leaders specifically what was important and what was not. People were important. Specific sabbath rules not so much.

The text continues with an account of Jesus noticing how the guests chose places of honor at the table. We all know how this works; places of honor are reserved up front or by the host and those deemed less significant are given tables farther away, or you sit lower down in table placement of seating.

People were asserting their privileged status by vying for seats and Jesus reprimanded them on it. He encouraged them that it would be better to start out at a lower place and be moved up than be asked to move down. He wasn’t speaking about table seating or table etiquette. He was teaching a lesson to all those gathered, ***“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

When I was a kid, probably around 2nd grade, I was exposed to the book, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” by Hans Christian Andersen. I am sure most of you are familiar with the story, but I absolutely loved it as a child - I still do. I think of it often.

It is the story of an Emperor who spends lavishly on his clothing at the expense of state matters. A couple of swindlers come along who pose as weavers and offer to make magnificent clothes for him that are invisible to those who are incompetent and don’t have the “sight to see”. The emperor hires them and they set up looms and begin to work. Officials and the emperor visit to check the progress of the weavers. Everyone sees that the looms are empty but for fear of seeming less than, they all pretend they can see the clothes. When the weavers say the clothes are done the emperor gets “dressed” and walks down the city in a procession. Everyone goes along with the pretense until a child blurts out that “the emperor has no clothes.” Everyone realizes they have been duped but the emperor continues the procession, not willing to admit he had been wrong. I LOVE THIS STORY. And the phrase ***“the emperor has no clothes”*** has often been repeated by me and others throughout our lives as we describe a person, an institution, a system, in which though puffed up, has no substance.

Jesus said all who exalt themselves will be humbled. Those who puff themselves up with their pride, those who may be unable to admit when they are wrong; those who assert their perceived privilege over others, will be humbled.

In ***The Emperor’s New Clothes***, the emperor continues marching down the street naked even when he had been called out. It was delightfully scandalous to my 2nd grade mind. But the more important lesson that was not lost on me then or now was that his pride prevented him from fixing what he knew to be wrong. He knew he was naked and yet just kept walking! He could have covered himself; he could have swallowed his pride and spoken at first and said, “I really don’t see anything”.

Sight should become insight which prompts action.

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What things has God allowed us to see which may need to be acted upon?

The sabbath meal continues this day with not just humbling the guests by pointing out that they should not be vying for position, but by Jesus also telling the one who invited him, the host, “when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or brothers…those who can repay you, ***but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.”***

***And you will be blessed. Because they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous***. 14:14

You will be blessed because they cannot repay you. What is our duty to the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind? What is our responsibility to those of lesser means who are around us?

The responsibility seems to be clear — invite them to the table. We care for them; we provide for them. We make a space for them.

What does it mean to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to the table?

In the Epistle today, in Hebrews, we are reminded to remember those who are in prison.

Those in prison, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; they are helpless to help themselves and are dependent on others. They are humbled because they are aware of their circumstances.

Let us be careful and be reminded of not asserting our privileged status in ways that can cause injury to others or in ways that neglect others or overlook others; those that are not able to help themselves.

Let us be conscious of and consider how to move the dependent and the less privileged to the front of the table. How do we, how are we, inviting them to the table? How do our lives attested by our actions, bear witness to the extravagant grace of God?

Amen.