

God's Maitre-d's

Patricia Barth

September 2, 2007

Luke14:1; 7-14

This scripture reading never fails to remind me of an advice column. Do you ever read Tell Me About It in the *Washington Post*?

Today's story might read something like this:

Dear Carolyn,

When my friend gives a dinner party, I never know where to sit! I'm afraid I might get stuck next to someone boring. Help!

Signed, Confused.

Dear Confused: "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face! So sit down with the "boring" people and talk to them politely. Then your hostess may say, "Hey, come sit next to me!" That will give the other dinner guests something to talk about!"

--Carolyn

Jesus' advice is good etiquette indeed — wouldn't you just die if you accidentally sat down in the guest of honor's seat at a banquet? — but of course his words have many deeper meanings as well.

Jesus was a revolutionary, not an advice columnist. He made it a point to confront the conventions of his day, not to enforce them. In this teaching, he's challenging the whole scheme of honor and shame that was at the root of ancient society. In that system, honor, like food, was scarce; in finite supply. If you didn't have honor, you had shame.

Only the wealthy had enough extra food to give dinner parties, and they were more like public relations events than a meeting of friends. Rich people came to feasts to see and be seen, like celebrities do today. Incidentally, did you know that Paris Hilton can get more than \$1,000 for showing up at someone's party for a few

minutes? In making guest lists, hosts concentrated on inviting those who could afford to.

In the Roman style of reclining to eat, couches were arranged in a U-shape called a triclinium. VIPs got to sit on the inside of the U; lesser people with less honor sat on the outside.

Jews, who generally had less status and smaller houses, arranged the places from high to low. The service as well as the places were different, at both Jewish and Roman feasts; people with more honor were given better quality food and wine, and so on down the table.

Jesus says, "Take the lowest seat; then you will be invited to move up." Where have we heard that before? Jesus was always telling his disciples, "The last shall be first." He's referring to the heavenly banquet at the end of time; that celebration where God the Creator will make all things right. The Greek word for honor that Luke uses here also means glory. Earthly celebrity or honor is not heavenly glory, because God's ways are not our ways. God will exalt and reward the humble.

In our individually-oriented, instant gratification North American society, honor and shame are not as important as they are in land-based cultures. We may honor our celebrities and rich people, but shame as a cultural value no longer has the power it used to. But in the Two-Thirds world where poverty reigns, as well as in other developed countries like Japan, the family unit, village or cultural group is more important than the individual, and the honor/shame dichotomy is very much alive.

We in the West tend to focus more on the individual values of pride and humility; or perhaps self-esteem and false humility, so that's the meaning we can take from this parable. What does it mean to be humble? You may remember Dicken's character Uriah Heep, who never failed to remind people just how humble he was. That kind of self-focus isn't really humility, no matter how much you say, "I'm just a humble person!"

Or some of you may have old tapes playing in your head, voices from the past that say, “You’re no good, how clumsy! You’re not really smart; who do you think you are?” Some of those limiting messages come from social expectations; others from our family or ourselves. For instance, I was raised in the pre-women’s liberation world, by a southern mother who trained me to deflect any compliment and never to describe myself or anything of mine in prideful terms. [This old rag?] I know people who continue to do this today — I was just talking to a friend who loves my sons; and I think hers are pretty special, too. But every time I would praise them, she would deflect my remark and talk about what problems they had and how mine are much better.

My mother in turn was raised in an era in which child-raising books admonished parents to deliberately attack pride in their children by making them focus on the negative in themselves rather than the positive. For example, if your daughter has a new dress and thinks she looks pretty, remind her that she didn’t polish her shoes! The things we do to our children in the name of making them “better people!”

There’s a Pennsylvania Dutch expression I learned when I was pastoring in a UCC church in York County – “Never put yourself forward.” I’m sure that floats around the Mennonite world, too! The interesting thing about that expression, it got to be a really handy excuse whenever I asked someone, especially a woman, to take office in the church.

None of this is true humility. Those old whispers in your head range from internalized verbal abuse or societal put-downs to false humility. Humility does not mean putting yourself down, or letting others put you down. Humility does not require you to step back and let others hold office or take risks. The word humility comes from the Latin for earth, humus. It simply means being down-to-earth; keeping it real; being genuine. To be real, to be humble, we also have to recognize our true giftedness; our talents and abilities and good qualities.

Make a promise to yourself to treat yourself as well as you treat others. You’d never say to another person, “What a stupid thing to

do!” so don’t say it to yourself either. And this applies to our children as well. Teach them to believe in themselves and have confidence in their abilities — not always telling them that each art project is the best ever, perfect and wonderful, because then they won’t learn to trust their own judgment. But praise their good choices and notice what they do, and they’ll grow up with true humility instead of false.

God has no use for false humility. There are no prizes for the ones who act the most humble and hanging back isn’t a virtue. God wants disciples, not wallflowers. Humility means living with gratitude, with the full knowledge that all good gifts, including our own wisdom and abilities, come from God. When we are humble, we recognize that we haven’t earned God’s grace; it is a pure, generous gift. And when we live humbly, we want to share that grace and generosity in the service of others.

Humble service is very much a part of life together as a church, not just in activities like Warm Nights or Community Café, but in worship, too. We serve others in many ways during the work week. When we come to church on Sunday, we praise God and are restored in the process. But that isn’t all there is to worship, at least in my humble opinion — we are also welcoming others to God’s heavenly banquet. There is room for all of us at God’s heavenly banquet, but the poor, the hungry, the excluded – they get to sit down first. The guests of honor in God’s kingdom are those who trusted, not in money or pride or power or celebrity, but in God’s love and providence, because that was all they had.

Until God’s heavenly dinner party takes place, we are God’s stand-ins. We offer people who don’t know God a little taste of God’s amazing love. You could even call us God’s maitre-d’s, welcoming others to a preview of the heavenly banquet. How do you think we rate? Is our church service a foretaste of the heavenly banquet? Does a first time visitor feel connected to God by our music and our prayers? Who will you invite to the feast, and how will you make them comfortable, especially if they are different from you? How would a differently-abled person feel about this facility?

These are good questions to ponder, as you discern what kind of a building and worship space will carry Hyattsville Mennonite

Church into the 21st Century and beyond, serving God and neighbor with humble and faithful hearts. Whether you stay here, or move elsewhere; know that God is always with you. God is always at work, leading the way. You just have to trust and follow. Thanks be to God.