

“A Humble Table”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 14: 1, 7-14

I imagine that if each of us were asked what we leaned more toward – humility or pride – we would probably answer humility. It’s sort of the expected answer, right? We would hope our friends, our family, and strangers who meet us would first think of us as a humble servant, not an arrogant, self-absorbed jerk.

The reality is that we all have prideful moments – that’s just part of being human. I like to consider myself as a pretty humble individual. But I’ll admit that I have my moments of pride. Earlier this summer, we took on the task of repainting our storage shed. And I managed to replace damaged wood panels with everything looking pretty consistent. After we finished painting, I looked at the roof on the shed, and decided it needed to be replaced. And I felt very proud of myself that I removed three layers of old shingles, replaced two damaged pieces of roof decking, and with the help of Debbie and the girls, got the new roof on before it rained. And the most prideful moment? No leaks! Yeah, my chest was a bit puffed out for a while after that home improvement accomplishment.

Unfortunately, no matter how much we try, we as humans cannot help but let humility take a back seat to pride and ego. We know that we are to think first of others, and not of ourselves. But when we do something significant, or someone we know does something of which to be proud, well, it’s hard not to say, “Hey look at me!” or “I’m so proud of myself!” This country in which we live teaches us to be proud of our accomplishments, especially when we have put in a lot of hard work to reach them. And a little pride is not a bad thing. It’s when we think only of ourselves, and nothing of our neighbors, that we have crossed the line from humility to arrogance.

Rabbi Shai Held writes the following: *Arrogance destroys. Those who glorify themselves at the expense of others end up ruining relationships at every turn . . . Why is arrogance so bad? For one thing, one who spends time admiring one’s own achievements quickly forgets how much he or she needs others. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all inescapably dependent on others – parents who birth us, teachers who nurture us, farmers who feed us, artisans and factory workers who help clothe us, and so on, almost literally without an end. And to be alive is to be dependent on God, who brings the world, and us within it, into being. The Talmudic sages insist that that one who*

becomes full of oneself is as one who denies the reality of God (Sotah 4b).

Mark Twain witheringly observed that “a self-made man is like a self-laid egg.” Arrogance is presumptuous; it’s also – necessarily – false. At bottom, arrogance is a form of forgetfulness. The only words we remember are I and me (Shai Held, *The Christian Century*, August 14, 2019: 19).

I think it’s no coincidence that many of Jesus’ teachings focus on human pride and humility. God created us in God’s own image. Yet with the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden, we have been struggling ever since to see God in us, rather than our own image. In many respects, Jesus came to us from the Father to show us that image of God in us once again. It is in his life of humble service that we are shown the example by which to live every day. It is not an easy model to follow, but it is the one we as Christians are given.

And the example we have today from Luke centers on the table; that is, the table around which we sit, gather, and eat. So many of Luke’s stories revolve around eating and table fellowship, that it is no surprise we witness Jesus teaching at the table, again. On this occasion, he and his disciples were the guests of one of the Pharisees. We learn from the very beginning that Jesus is not free of worries, for “they were watching him closely.” But as we have learned from the past, it matters not who is watching him or what their intentions may be – Jesus is most concerned with teaching his followers about the kingdom of God.

And the first bit of wisdom he imparts seems like nothing more than common sense when first read. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.” As Jesus notes, this will save you much embarrassment when the host comes and asks to move down the line so that the primary guests may be seated in their proper place. Any of us would know to do this, because the last thing any of us would want to do is to make a fool out of ourselves in front of so many people!

What sets this wisdom apart from common sense is verse 11: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” As one commentator remarks: *The saying is what literary critics call a polar reversal. It is not just that the exalted will be humbled; we know about that from the story of Job. Nor is it simply that the humble will be exalted; we know about that from the story of Joseph. This is a complete reversal in which those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. When the north pole becomes the south pole and the south pole becomes the north pole, a world is overturned.*

What starts as a breach of etiquette for a number of guests ends up with a prediction about a radical change . . . God is at the root of this

polar reversal, a theme Luke will not let the readers forget (Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*, 495).

The table in God's heavenly kingdom is not made up of those who think so highly of themselves, or do not offer to release their seats of power. It's exactly the opposite – the most-humble and least full-of-themselves will inherit the kingdom, and sit at the head table in God's heavenly banquet.

It is in light of this revelation that Jesus issues wisdom to the Pharisee who has invited him: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Let's face it: we've all done something nice for someone with the small yet real intention that our good deed might be repaid to us one future day. Jesus catches all of us in our lack of humility, and tells us what must be done in this new, upside-down world of God's.

Rabbi Held continues: *Jesus' point, ultimately, is not to deny our welcome to those closest to us, but to extend our welcome to those whom others tend to forget or ignore. Why is this so important? Because to invite the unseen and unregarded is to embody the living antithesis to self-aggrandizement and self-promotion. A great deal comes down to upending the ethos that so often dominates our lives. Instead of plotting what you can get, ask how you can serve and what you can give . . . If arrogance destroys, kindness and generosity give life – both to the giver and to the receiver (ibid).*

To the best of my knowledge, the last time I preached on this text from Luke was June 27, 2010. That was nine years ago, and it was the Sunday before we dedicated this sanctuary to the glory of God. That day marked the end of a very long journey for our congregation, a journey which was full of a lot of hard work, a great deal of sacrifice by an incredible number of people, and yes, a good measure of pride in what we had been able to accomplish with God's help.

Nine years ago, I said the following: *If next Sunday we sit back and only say, "Hey, look at us and what we've done!" it will be as if we were taking a seat at the head of the table and we'd never been asked to sit there. If we relax and say, "We need to step back and stop taking risks," it will be as if we are only interested in serving those who look like us, talk like us, think like us. This new space should produce a bit of pride for us as a community – I don't deny that. But I would caution us if that pride clouds our ability to see the humble around us, and thus show humility as disciples of Christ.*

It means we should not be blind to the un-churched who walk through our doors, and wave them off as too much work or too difficult to get to know. It means we should not be afraid to reach out and greet

intentionally someone who has a different skin color than us, or does not speak English so well. It means we should be willing to step out in faith and bring as many people as we can to God's humble table, so that others might be spiritually fed as we ourselves have been fed by God's grace ("A Humble Table, June 27, 2010, Frank Mansell III).

Nine years later, how would you say we've done? Have we sat back and taken it easy? Or have we continued to seek ways to invite all of God's children to God's humble table?

I believe there have been wonderful signs of our continued desire to connect with those who are the unseen and unregarded. Four years ago, the Deacons changed our annual church picnic from a fellowship activity just for our church, into the Community Picnic, where we invited all our neighbors to the table. The last two years, we have taken one of our Sunday morning worship services outside these walls and into the public sphere, worshipping at Meadowood Park; this year, we witnessed several guests join us for that event and feel welcome at the table. Those are just two indications of how we have tried new ways to welcome those whom others tend to forget or ignore.

But we also must not be prideful and arrogant and think we've done all we need to do. There are still so many ways we must be stretched to embrace the forgotten, the ignored, the weak, the poor, the unchurched, the lost. How might our congregation continue to change and evolve to reflect new voices, new cultures, and new experiences of God's grace? What do we need to do – individually and as a community – to make sure all have a seat at the table?

Later in this service, we will say from the table: "People will come from north and south, from east and west, and sit at table in God's heavenly kingdom." That's what Jesus is talking about today. No one is to be excluded from the love God has shown us in Jesus Christ. All are to be invited. In God's kingdom, the world is turned on its head. In God's kingdom, all will share in this feast. Which is why every time we come to this table, we embody the vision and promise of our Lord.

The master has invited himself into our hearts. How will we respond to that invitation? With pride? With grace? How will we invite others out of humility to the table our Lord has set before us? May we respond to the Spirit's leading with openness and joy so that all might come and receive the gifts which our Lord has provided.

Thanks be to God. Amen.