

Humility

Luke 14:1, 7-11

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

August 28th, 2022

Matt Matthews

Here we have another story of Jesus on the sabbath. In chapter 13, Jesus healed the woman on the sabbath, and earlier in this chapter, Jesus heals a man. Both on the sabbath. The Pharisees are religious, and faithful, and particular about the law. They're doing their best, and they care about their tradition. They want people to get it right. Healing on the sabbath, at least to many Pharisees, is a no-no.

So here at dinner in the home of a Pharisee, everybody is closely watching Jesus. What's he going to do on the sabbath? Will he behave himself? They are watching Jesus.

But Jesus is watching them, also. Jesus is watching them at this dinner scrambling to get the best seats, the places of honor. And he calls them on it. In God's house, in God's kin-dom, at the heavenly banquet, God assigns the places of honor. You don't pick them for yourself. And here on earth, the same applies. Make your earthly banquets resemble the heavenly one. The places of honor will be given to the lowly. (This is a big theme in Luke.)

Jesus will go on to give his host advice (in the following verses). Don't invite just people you know and love to your house, invite those who would never expect an invitation: invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Again and again and again, Jesus reorients his disciples and would-be disciples to a new way of doing things. Ancient Middle Eastern dinner customs may have been very clear about who to invite and where they are to sit. But Jesus has other ideas about human customs.

He's doing a lot of hard work in this story that takes place on a sabbath: he's chip-chipping away at the human way of doing things, and suggesting a better way of doing things—God's way.

Jesus is grooming his disciples. Jesus is teaching the disciples about hospitality, about generosity, about humility. The disciple's place at any banquet—either here in Champaign or in God's heaven—is the low seats. Give others the places of honor. Welcome everyone in, and put the other guests at the front of the line. Let the lowly take the best seats.

If you want to be my disciple, this is how you'll approach life. And of all the characteristics that Jesus wants to see in his followers, humility is one of the most important. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Imagine if we lived more like this. What would happen if we put others first? What would happen if we went out of our way to make others feel welcome? What would happen if we were less concerned about ourselves and treated others with care and respect and gratitude?

Paul writes these words to the Romans (12:11): *Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.* What if we did that more, better, with greater zeal and more humility?

* * *

On the night I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, Clay Brantley preached the sermon. He told stories about what it might mean to be a humble disciple of Jesus. What might it look like to put others first? What might it look like to treat others with respect, honor, and love? It was a lovely sermon. We could see the word-pictures he painted. We imagined what he imagined.

He told this story, an old folk tale. Clay got the story from M. Scott Peck.

There was a wise abbot of a monastery who was the friend of an equally wise rabbi. The abbot's community was dwindling, and the faith life of his monks was fearful, weak, and anxious. He went to his friend and wept. His friend, the Rabbi, comforted him, and said "there is something you need to know, my brother. The Messiah is one of you."

"What," exclaimed the abbot, "the Messiah is one of us? How can this be?"

But the Rabbi insisted that it was so, and the abbot went back to his monastery wondering and praying, comforted and excited. Once back in the monastery, he would pass by a monk and wonder if he was the one. Sitting in chapel, praying, he would hear a voice and look intently at a face and wonder, is he the one? The abbot had always been kind, but now began to treat all of his brothers with profound kindness and awe, ever deeper respect, even reverence. Soon everyone noticed. One of the other brothers came to him and asked him what had happened to him.

After some coaxing, the abbot told him what the rabbi had said. Soon the other monk was looking at his brothers differently, with deeper respect and wondering.

Word spread quickly: *the Messiah is one of us.* The monastery warmed up and became full of life, worship, love, and grace. The prayer life was rich and passionate, everyone became devoted, and services were vibrant. Soon, the surrounding villagers came to the services, listening and watching intently, and many joined the community of monks. When newcomers took their vows, they were told the mystery: *The Messiah is one of us.* And the monastery grew and expanded into house after house, and the monks grew in wisdom and grace before each other and in the eyes of God.

* * *

Clay Brantley asked us, what would happen if we treated others with care, with love? He asked, what would happen if we honored God by being humble and kind?

What would happen?

What could be?