

Toward A Place of Grace Luke 14:1, 7-14

Intro

[ppt] I believe everyone knows this painting. This painting is Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper. This painting is so well known that we have come to assume that Jesus sat at the center of the long table with his disciples on either side of him at the Last Supper. However, many scholars think Da Vinci's depiction is historically inaccurate. According to ancient Roman and Jewish culture, the actual setting of the Last Supper would resemble a triclinium like this picture on the screen. [ppt] A triclinium was a Roman styled table in the shape of a "U", so the food could easily be served while guests could see each other. Where would Jesus sit at this table? Not in the middle. [ppt] The host would sit the second to the left. Interesting? This table setting was meant to provide equal access to the food and conversation, but in fact, each position at the table was assigned in terms of the guests' status, and all the guests immediately knew their rank in relation to the others.¹ The host of the feast sat the second to the left with the guest of honor on his left, and a trusted friend to his right. "The seating then continued around the triclinium, the most important guests seated on the left, then going around the table, with the least important sitting on the far right."² Now we have a clearer picture of the context in which Jesus tells the parable. Where do you want to sit at this table?

Problem in the Bible: Hierarchy and Reciprocity

One time, Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees. We don't know why this Pharisee invited the scandalous prophet for dinner or how he treated Jesus, but all the guests had their eyes on him. Perhaps not in a friendly way, because Jesus often had challenged their traditions and teachings. They were watching him closely and Jesus also closely looked at them, one by one, face to face. What they wore, where they sat, how they looked and interacted with one another. From their garments, Jesus might have noticed that all guests belonged to the upper class with power and wealth. They seemed to know each other quite well. Jesus also noticed how each person had tried to elbow their way into the places of honor.

Yes. There was the power seat, and everyone wanted to get closer to that seat. If I were there, I would prefer to sit on the far right not because I am humble, but I simply because I don't like attention. We might choose our seat in terms of our personal preferences and not give much meaning to where we sat. However, in ancient Roman society, honor was prized and valued above all else, so people engaged in status competition for honor. Your seat mattered because it was a sign of your reputation, and it showed how important person you were.

While we consider humility an important virtue, particularly for leaders, humility was not considered a virtue in Roman society. In Latin, *humilitas* is the word for humility. For us humility is understood as a modest view of one's own importance. However, in Greco-Roman culture, *humilitas* meant something like "crushed" or "debased." So people never exercised humility before anyone deemed equal or lesser than themselves. Influenced by the dominant culture, the guests in today's text wanted to look for and tried to secure the higher places for themselves. For them, this competition for the places of honor was nothing to be ashamed of because where they sat showed their achievement and honor they had acquired. The

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-luke-141-7-14-5>

² <http://www.redeemerofisrael.org/2012/04/setting-of-last-supper-triclinium.html>

fundamental problem of this upward-bound competition for honor was that it stratified the basic human relationship and fixed it in a hierarchical manner.

Along with hierarchy, reciprocity was a basic principle that defined human relationship in today's text. From Jesus' parable, we can assume that the host of the dinner seemed to invite his friends, family, relatives and rich neighbors who would in return invite him in the future. "Give and take" defines the basic social interaction among them. In our society, when a billionaire like Warren Buffett or Bill Gates share their wealth for a common good, what do we say? We admire and praise their philanthropic acts and generosity. However, in the Greco-Roman world, helping the poor was not a thing to be praised. Some have said, "The Greek word *philanthrôpia* doesn't have the sense of our modern philanthropy. One is *philanthrôpos* towards one's own people, family, and guests – not towards the poor."³ Helping the poor was not counted as good acts and the rich were not expected to help the poor in the Greco-Roman world. "Family First! Give and take!"... This reciprocity-based relationship is basically a closed relationship and hinders one from practicing radical hospitality toward the poor and extending the boundary of group. Wealth and gifts move only among in-group members or within the same socio-economic class. There was a no place for the poor, the weak, or the loser. There was a no place for redemption and transformation in this kind of relationship. In other words, there was a no place for grace.

Sadly, our society and our social interactions are not so much different from theirs even though we are living in a democratic society. We know that our society has been stratified primarily in terms of wealth and we accepted it as a norm. If you go to an airport, you see at least three different classes. We compete with each other for better houses, better salaries, better schools or better whatever. Upward-bound competition continues. Family First! America First! Factionalism and reckless political partisanship continues to divide this nation. Hierarchy and reciprocity still dominate our society and define our basic social relationships with others. What are we missing? Humility. Dr. Christopher M. Bellitto, a history professor at Kean University, says humility is America's missing virtue.

Grace in the Bible: God exalts those who humbly serve the lowly

Following dominant cultural values, the guests tried to elbow their way to places of honor. Then, Jesus as a wise teacher told them a parable and redirected their attention to what Jesus saw. Jesus said, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.' Embarrassed, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left." Jesus was not simply giving them practical advice, rather, Jesus reminded them that the principle of human relationship in God's kin-dom is radically different from that of the Roman empire. While praising and exalting oneself was a norm of Roman society, Jesus said, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." "Then he turned to the host. "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You will be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

Humility and hospitality are the keys for a new social relationship for righteous people. The real power of humility and hospitality is not that they make us look like better people with

³ <https://aeon.co/essays/the-poor-might-have-always-been-with-us-but-charity-has-not>

good manners or they make our relationships with others go more smoothly. The real power of humility and hospitality is that it destabilizes and reverses the fixed hierarchical social order of the Roman empire and also ours. In a hierarchical society, the only way to a better life or more honorable living is upward through winning endless competitions or belonging to and building up a strong faction. Humility and hospitality are the opposite streams of movement.

Jesus teaches us that God is building God's reign in which humility and hospitality are guiding principles for human relationship. Instead of the upward-bound competition, God invites people to come down to the ground. Instead of building a strong clan, God invites people to break down walls and be connected with others through acts of hospitality. In other words, God invites us to live in terms of different values from the world. Salvation is changing our orientation toward kin-dom's values of humility and hospitality.

Last week, I participated in the North East Jurisdiction Korean clergy spiritual retreat. The main speaker was a respected pastor from Korea and he said that we, Christians, need to change our understanding of grace. When we speak of grace, we tend to think of success, healing, wealth or other good things. But, he said, if a person can still offer gratitude in the midst of illness, that's grace. If a person with economic hardship can still share what's in his hand, that's grace. He shared a story about one of his church members. This church member was a rich man and he had made his financial fortune in the arms industry. One day, as he was watching the news with his young son, a news segment about war came on, showing missile strikes on a city and people escaping from the city. After a while, his young son asked him, "is that good for your company?" He was shocked by his young son relating his work with the war. He could not ignore it, but at the same time, could not easily abandon his company because it had brought him a lot of money. During, a business trip, he could not forget the conversation with his son. He desperately prayed to God, crying and singing hymns. That night, he experienced God and sold his business. His income dramatically reduced, but he said, he is happy. I believe this is what repentance looks like. It is what a salvation looks like.

We call Jesus Christ living water and water always flows downhill and it never stays, but spreads. Humility is downward movement and hospitality is outward movement. We are called to follow Jesus through acts of humility and hospitality. My friend, let us move toward where our Christ leads. Let us move toward a place of grace in which we may deeply immerse ourselves in abundant God' grace. Amen.