

“Open Seating is Risky”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Hebrews 13:1-3,5-6,16; Luke 14:1,7-14

Richard E. Otty  
August 28, 2016

Last Sunday, I preached a sermon with “shame” in the title, referring to synagogue leaders shamed by Jesus after they objected to him healing a woman on the Sabbath. The shame, however, did not come from Jesus’ words, but the way the witnessing crowd rejoiced at Jesus, which embarrassed the leaders.

While I did not include the word “shame” in today’s title, it is a key element of our lesson, in which Jesus addresses a prevailing “honor-shame culture” of the first century. Quite simply, in the Roman world of the day, and extending into Jewish religious life as well, there was a keen awareness of what brought honor and what brought shame to oneself. It seemed to be so ingrained that one might imagine a person awaking each day and evaluating what to do or not do, with whom to associate or avoid, all based on whether it would enhance or at least maintain one’s honor among others. In so doing, one was also seeking to avoid anything or anyone who would bring one shame.

I will admit that while I have been aware of times when I have been embarrassed, or I have embarrassed myself, I cannot imagine the degree to which I sense honor and shame dominated first century life. I am hard put to find a parallel in our culture, though I expect there remains within most all of us a desire to be seen in a good light by others and maintain a good status. Interestingly, this made me think that when Presbyterian ministers retire, their official status becomes, “Honorably retired.”

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is again invited to dine in the home of a Pharisee. It is the Sabbath, so we might think of what many of us used to observe as Sunday dinner, following church. In those days, there were no sports practices that would cause one to hurry dinner, must less miss church. If anything, the minister would be warned not to preach too long because the roast was in the oven. There were few, if any competing activities. It was a special dinner, often with extended family included. Now, in reality, special did not always mean pleasant with extended family or even immediate family. There might be one grandmother frying chicken in only her way, and another grandmother on the sides being her ornery self.

As we turn now to our lesson, let us picture Jesus at a Sabbath day dinner like our traditional Sunday dinner. We expect he is invited because of his status as a teacher, not because he is particularly well liked by the Pharisees. In fact, in the very first verse of our Luke 14 lesson, we read he is being watched closely.

*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

Have you ever been watched closely – as an adult? I’m not talking about the first time you met your in-laws, or when you interviewed for college or a job. I am talking about the suspicious glances that imply, “Who are you? What are you doing here? Why on earth did the host invite you?”

Perhaps Jesus is being watched because just before this he has healed the woman on the Sabbath, and in fact, what is not included in the lectionary is another healing Jesus performs before this meal that silenced the Pharisees present. Yet, as we continue, with what I think may be Luke’s intentional irony, Jesus now turns and watches everyone else.

Luke 14, continuing at verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup>When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. <sup>8</sup>“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; <sup>9</sup>and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. <sup>10</sup>But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. <sup>11</sup>For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

*<sup>12</sup>He said also to the one who had 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. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup>And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

Forty years ago, while serving as a seminary intern in Springfield, Missouri, I was included in a dinner invitation to the whole staff of the church. This included the senior pastor, two associate pastors, the director of music, and their spouses. We gathered and visited, and then were called into a formal dining room, with fine china and silver. I recall the dinner was served in courses, perhaps even by hired servers. Who invited us? I cannot remember. What did we eat? I do not recall. What sticks in my mind were the line of forks extending to the left of our plates. I think there were four or five, and the reason I remember is that upon receiving one of the initial courses, Curt, one of the associate pastors asked, “Which fork are we supposed to use?”

Before an uncomfortable hushed silence set in, or our twits of laughter echoed our own confusions, the hostess said flatly, “Curt, you begin with the outside fork and work your way in.” Now, I hope that is true, because it is a practice I have followed in the few times over the past four decades I have sat at a table with more than two forks at my place.

What was palpable that evening was the embarrassment, even humiliation, which, even if not intentional, seemed to be directed at the associate pastor for asking the question. For all I know, he may have known to begin with the outside fork and was just making a joke. If so, it is likely the last time he tried that joke, at least with that couple.

Still, I’m not sure even that story comes close to the kind of humiliation and shame Jesus was addressing in a culture where gauging one’s honor was an everyday priority. And to the extent honor and shame are still a part of Middle Eastern culture, a part of the world in which our nation is so intensely involved, we should probably be humbled by our inability to fully understand.

In our lesson, it sounds like Jesus is not questioning the honor-shame system. It seems like he is simply offering common sense advice to take the lowest seat at a banquet so one will not be humiliated by being asked to give up your seat, and might actually be honored by being invited to a more prestigious seat. It would be like being invited to sit at the head table of a prestigious fundraiser even if one was not among the social elite or the largest of donors.

Yet, then Jesus slips in these words, “*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*” These words move the teaching beyond a strategy for either avoiding humiliation or gaining honor, to an illumination of what God values. In essence, Jesus is saying, “Imagine a different kind of realm, where honor is accorded to those who risk their own humiliation on behalf of others.” Readers of Luke’s Gospel will think of Jesus himself.

After providing a new view of how God views honor, and the admonition to seek one’s honor from God rather than others, Jesus has a parallel teaching for those hosting and issuing invitations. We might be reminded of the trauma caused in finalizing the guest list for a wedding reception or special birthday or anniversary celebration. While space at the church might be ample for all who want to attend the actual wedding service, the number for the reception may be limited by space or money. Jesus pinpoints exactly what we sort through as we create a guest list – relatives we must invite, including those we pray will RSVP with a “No.”; people who have invited us to their weddings; close friends, neighbors and colleagues; and, I suspect there might even be the occasional consideration of someone who, if they attended, would enhance one’s status as people whispered, “Look who is here.” “Look who’s here” comments also allow other invitees to brag about with whom they attended a reception, thus increasing their honor and status.

Just as we may not fully understand the honor-shame culture of the first century, in his invitation instructions, we may not realize Jesus is addressing a powerful, ingrained culture of reciprocity. Joel Green puts it this way in his biblical commentary on Luke, “central to the political stability of the Empire was the ethics of reciprocity. [Green, Joel, Luke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1997), p. 550] Who one invites, or by extension, even those with whom one spends one’s time, affects one’s status in the culture, society, community. Outside of family, “gifts [and invitations], by unwritten definition, were never ‘free,’ but were given and received with either explicit or implicit strings attached.” [Ibid.]

Jesus upsets this system of reciprocity, and he does so by providing hosts with a protocol for invitations that extends beyond just inviting those different from oneself in terms of class, race, power, privilege, or culture. When he speaks of those to be added to the guest list – *the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind* – he is not writing the first draft of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In documents found from the Qumran community of the time, those Jesus names – *“the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”* – were among those specifically listed as unacceptable for inclusion in that religious community. Their poverty or disability was considered a sign of their sin and God’s resultant disfavor. These were literally outcasts and unwelcome.

We may believe we are beyond such stark exclusions. Yet, today I hear people use the words alien, illegal, former convict, welfare, unemployed in ways that create a cultural hierarchy of honor and shame, inclusion and exclusion, welcome and unwelcome. It may seep into the culture of the church as well, though most every church these days either puts “All are welcome” on a sign or in its mission statement. It is almost always a sincere belief; yet, I would suggest “all are welcome” is not an invitation, or at least not a turn your world upside down kind of invitation Jesus calls his followers to issue.

Those hosts of the first century who heard Jesus tell them who they should invite might very well have replied, “That’s way beyond our reality.” Yet, Jesus might argue, “Then it would seem your perceived reality needs to change.”

Most of us are aware of small urban churches, once vibrant in their neighborhoods, with members being able to walk to church. But then the neighborhoods changed, people moved away but came back to worship; new people moved in, but they were different and while not shunned, there was no effort to open the door of welcome...until the church needed people. I served a church in New York in which the former pastor had been active in the community, and indeed some new people had joined, but I recall on more than one occasion someone will state in a meeting that while the poor and downtrodden are most welcome, “the reality is someone needs to give the money to fix the roof, pay the electric and gas bills, and the pastor’s salary.” Might we imagine Jesus again saying, “Then it would seem your perceived reality needs to change.”?

I think our understanding of Jesus’ teaching about who to invite is enhanced when considered alongside our Hebrews reading, with its beloved verse, *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

If the church is truly a community, and the community as envisioned by Jesus includes those deemed the outcast of society, then most churches are incomplete communities because of who is not present. Again, we begin to understand that “All are welcome” is not really an invitation, unless it sounds genuine by those who are quite unlike us.

Mutual love begins with hospitality, and in the Hebrews verse, within full hospitality and welcome is an expectation of surprise, and delight. It enables us to figure out not only how to do mission for the poor, but be in the presence of those with whom we might not normally associate, much less invite to our tables. Sometimes in groups of people who know each other, I will suggest each person share one thing about themselves that others in the group would be surprised to learn. It is amazing the hobbies, experiences, interests that emerge from such sharing. Might we imagine doing the same with the stranger?

I thought about the last day I was with the Maine mission trip. I was visiting with the woman on whose home we were working. I will be the first to admit that earlier in the week, I had looked around at the style of living and choices made in terms of electronics and other things, and caught myself becoming judgmental; so easy to do when it is just my eyes taking in the images, creating the stereotypes, forming the judgments. In our conversation, the woman shared her father had died that morning, and then I was privileged to witness her incredible tenderness when she shared this news with two of her foster sons, not simply as fact, but with an evident sensitivity to and care for their reactions.

It seems Jesus' invitation is to consciously invite the stranger, sit with the stranger, and be ready for the surprise of mutual love that binds rather than the stereotype that divides.

This helps me remember God could care less about whether I know which fork to use with each course of a formal meal. Jesus tells us God cares more about both who I have invited to sit beside me, and whether they feel fully welcomed and honored, even if they are unable to repay my invitation. Open seating is risky, but that is where the surprises happen, and where we sense God's delight.