
Hospitality, Hubris, and Humility

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17, Year C

We have before us in the gospel reading this morning what I can only assume was one of Emily Post's favorite passages in scripture. The original etiquette expert surely loved Jesus' admonition of the poor behavior that might infiltrate a dinner party or a wedding banquet. I mean, grown men scrambling for the best seat at the table only to be knocked down a peg or two when someone more important comes along, what an embarrassment! What's more in this passage, Jesus gives tips on how to host a dinner party and who to invite. Useful! Although, it's safe to say that Jesus didn't sit down with the Pharisees to write a chapter in an etiquette book because, in fact, what he asks of us in this moment is awfully countercultural. At this point, Emily Post politely excuses herself from the conversation with the priest.

You might know that on any given Sunday, there are many jobs that clergy can occupy up here around the altar and chancel.

A priest can be the celebrant, the one who officiates in the eucharistic liturgy. Or in simpler terms, the one who talks a lot and waves their hands around behind that table. One might preach on a Sunday, demonstrated flawlessly right before you now. A priest or a deacon can serve as Deacon of the Word, and that's the person who reads the gospel and offers the dismissal from the back of the church at the end of the service. A priest or a deacon can also serve as Deacon of the Table, this is the person who sets the altar with all the bread, wine, cups, plates, napkins, and everything necessary for communion. And of course we all get to serve a role during the distribution of communion.

Of all of these jobs, truthfully, every single one is my favorite. You really can't go wrong.

But one of the jobs affords a privilege that the others do not. If you're the Deacon of Table, you get to set the table, and then you get to stand right there while the choir at your back and you get to face this direction and you get to look out at the whole congregation. This is when we take attendance. Just kidding. But it is a chance to get a good long look out at who's here. To get a good look at all of the people out in the pews. Because out there are all kinds of kinds worshipping and praying with all of your stories and stuff in and among you.

It is a beautiful sight.

Later, the Deacon of Table gets to stand behind the altar during communion. From that place, one can see every single person who comes up to the altar rail, and there's a pretty good view of the line down the aisle. So, really, you can see everyone who receives communion.

It is a beautiful sight.

This is not because we are a generally well-dressed congregation, although we are, but because there so many different types of God's children who come forward. It is beautiful to see all of you: families wrangling babies, empty nesters looking on nostalgically, the rich, poor, young, old, people here for the 200th time or people here for their very first day. All kinds come forward to the same table and all of us present our hands. Clean supple hands, dry cracked hands, sticky hands, marker hands, big hands, little hands, steady hands, shaky hands, and last week a little porcupine toy in hand. Together around this one table here we all are. In that moment, we get to see firsthand in this moment the breadth of God's generous invitation to join together at this table. With all of our usness we make way to this one same table and to the gift that's given here, the

sacrifice of Jesus' life to fill us up with God's love.

All of us.

It is a beautiful sight. And it is good look around and see it.

It seems to me that's what Jesus was after in these parables. There he is at a dinner party seeing people act a bit foolish. Sure, they're embarrassing themselves from a social etiquette standpoint, but what's more, they lack humility. What he wants for these people, and for us, is to see beyond ourselves. He teaches us here to pay attention to who's around the table, to look and see that there are in fact others of God's children with us. You see, we're worthy of being there, we are. We've been invited. Someone said come to this table, you, I want you at my table. And so, Jesus tells us that we might approach the table seeing ourselves as invited, not as the VIP, not as the host's favorite, but as invited. Worthy of a spot.

Hubris worries about which seat we're in. Humility recognizes that it is good to be invited there at all.

Humility takes seeing beyond ourselves. Seeing others as worthy just as we are. Practice humility, Jesus says. You're going to get exalted, that means lifted up, by that humility, he says. I think we can all agree it's better to get lifted up from a level place than to get leveled flat falling down from a high place. See beyond yourself, practice humility, there you will find your life lifted up.

Now, y'all remember that Jesus is saying all of this at a dinner party, and I'm guessing after he told that parable, there was some awkward silence around the dinner table. But Jesus kept talking, didn't he? I wonder what Emily Post would have to say about that.

He goes on to be very very clear about who we should include in the invitations we extend to sit around our tables. Not just your brother, not just the wealthy, not just our best friends, because those folks will repay us with an equal invitation later on. Invite those who need the invitation the most. He says, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Maybe he means that literally, but maybe he means invite the ones you know of who can't repay it, the ones whose calendars aren't packed, the ones overlooked, the ones who might cause a little trouble, the ones who never went to cotillion and don't know which fork to use. Invite the ones you usually wouldn't, he says.

And guess what? Then you will be blessed.

It may not help you climb the social ladder or score an invite to Taylor Swift's wedding, but God recognizes when we broaden our view and see one another as worthy of the invitation. Then you will be blessed. It is God's will for us that we see one another and draw in those upon whom we most often cast judgement. Hubris strategically stacks the invite list with dignitaries. Humility invites all of God's children to the table.

Maybe that makes you nervous. Fair. It's a different way of doing things.

The good news is that you can see what you're getting yourself into if you pay attention during communion in a few minutes. All kinds of kinds will be in front of you, behind you, and walking down that aisle next to you. We invite everyone to this table because that's what Jesus does, right? He isn't just talk here, this morning and throughout scripture, he's sitting at tables that people think he has no business sitting at. And remember that the night before he died, he did invite his friends over, and he told them to keep coming to this table to remember everything he did and everything he taught us, and he didn't say some of us, or the fanciest, or the most important, or the most popular ones. He said take, eat, drink this all of you. All of you. All of us. Even that guy who's kind of a jerk? Even her with the attitude? Even the couple who never chipped in for the tickets? Even the Tennessee fan?

All of us.

Hubris excludes souls and their circumstances from this table. Humility recognizes that we are all invited, and we all belong at the same table. To share in one holy communion, to be filled equally with God's love, and then to take that love out into the world to all the tables at which we sit. If we practice humility, if we see beyond ourselves, then Jesus says we will be living exalted, blessedly, and in accordance with God's will.

So, in just a few minutes, you're going to see this unfold in quite the show, and I hope look beyond yourself and see it.
