

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost • September 1, 2019

Proverbs 25:6-7 • Psalm 112 • Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 • Luke 14:1, 7-14

The New Testament was written in an honor/shame culture. For Jesus and his contemporaries, honor and shame were a kind of social capital to be exchanged. To be honored was to have your self-worth recognized and affirmed by the people around you. To be shamed was to have your claim of self-worth rejected by the people around you. In honor/shame cultures, honor is often viewed as a finite resource.¹ So for someone to receive more honor, someone else has to be less honored.

When you get that honor/shame dynamic in your head, many of the stories in the gospels that seem strange at first glance start to make a little more sense. When the disciples argue over who is the greatest, they're arguing over who is the most honorable. What is the ranking? Who is number one? Who is number twelve? Or think about the scene early in Mark's gospel where Jesus' family hears that he's teaching and healing. They try to stop him because they're worried that he's going to bring shame to their family. They're afraid Jesus is going to give them a bad reputation.

You don't have to squint very hard to make out some of these dynamics in our own culture. We present ourselves a certain way to get the approval of others. We worry about maintaining our reputation. We acquire social capital and then cash it in to get what we want. We don't live in an honor/shame culture, but we spend an awful lot of time seeking honor and avoiding shame.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is eating at a Pharisee's house on the Sabbath. And when the time comes for everyone to sit and have the meal, Luke says that Jesus "noticed how the guests chose the places of honor." It's like a game of musical chairs. Who is number three? Am I number five or number seven? Who is up and who is down?

And so while all these people are arguing, trying to negotiate the proper order, Jesus offers an etiquette lifehack. A little slight of hand to help you look good at the party. "Why don't you start out low," Jesus suggests, "and then move higher?" Instead of worrying about placing yourself too highly, just place yourself too low and let the host else invite you up. Not only will you not have to worry about being sent down. But then everyone can watch you move up.

This is probably good advice. But it's also a little bit weird coming from Jesus. We're used to Jesus healing people from their illnesses and teaching them about the kingdom of God, but instead Jesus is doling out advice on seating arrangements like a first century Emily Post.

But what Jesus is doing is offering a kind of setup to the big punchline. He's trying to get the Pharisees to reveal how much they care about acquiring honor. Because the first rule about seeking honor is that you have to pretend that you actually don't care about honor at all. You have to look like you're not trying to acquire status. Don't tell people you went to Harvard; tell them you went to school in Boston. Don't tell people you bought a condo on Central Park West; tell them you're downsizing. But now these Pharisees have revealed that they actually *do* care about acquiring honor. They're obsessed with it. And so Jesus has an even *better* tip. "If you *really* want to be honored," he advises, "stop inviting your friends over."

It looks like Jesus is endorsing this whole honor/shame arms race, giving the Pharisees some advice on how to get ahead, but it turns out he's saying the exact opposite. He's saying this whole system, this whole impulse, is wrongheaded. Because when you give to your friends, all you want is their affirmation. All you want is for them to confer honor on to you. You're not giving so much as you're exchanging. The Pharisees and many of us envision a world in which honor and shame form

¹ David Noel Freedman and Allen C. Meyers, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 603.

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a hierarchy with people at the top and people at the bottom. And if that's true, the goal in life is to get to the top and stay there.

But if you want to find honor, Jesus says, give a banquet to the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Invite the people you believe have nothing to offer you in return. In other words, identify yourself with those in need and, here's the most important part, encounter all of God's people as equals. Jesus replaces a system of hierarchy with an ethic of hospitality. Instead of striving to take down the people above us and maintain the status quo for the people below us, Jesus empowers us to give to others and receive from others as equals. Hospitality is all about equality. It is about welcoming the person who seems to have a lot to offer you the same way you welcome someone who seems to have nothing to offer you at all.

When we think about hospitality, we typically think of it as being a host. We are great at being hosts. We *love* being hosts. We love to bring people into our space and make them feel comfortable and valued and cared for. We love to tell them about our traditions and teach them about our practices and introduce them to our community.

But there's a whole second part of hospitality that we often forget about: being a guest. And being a guest is way more difficult than being a host. In fact, most of us really don't like being guests. Because being a guest means you have to give up control. It means you don't always know what's going on or what's coming next. It's not a coincidence that when we host interfaith or ecumenical events here at Advent, people love it. But when we go to other people's houses of worship, suddenly we have a lot of questions. How long is their service? Am I going to have to sing? Is it wrong if I pray with them? Is it wrong if I don't pray with them? That's normal. Because going into someone else's space means giving some of your power over to them and trusting that they are going to care for you.

Just as an aside, every once in a while instead of coming to Advent some Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning, you should go to a church you haven't been to before and where you don't know anyone. Weddings and funerals don't count. Go to mass. Go to coffee hour. Go to the adult forum. Do the whole thing. Have the experience of being a guest in a community where you don't know the norms, the rules, or the practices. Practice being a guest. Practice receiving hospitality.

Because when we act only as hosts, when we only act as givers, we assume, like the Pharisees in today's story, that there are some people with nothing to offer us. We assume that we are the sole caretakers of God's gifts, and that our job is to dispense them out in the world to people who don't have them. That's quite a presumptuous position to take. But so often it's the one that we default back to.

But when we take on the role of guest, we allow other people to give of themselves. Allowing someone to teach us about their traditions, practices, and stories can be a real gift. One of the most important things we have to give others, especially from communities and backgrounds different from our own, is our attention. It's our interest. It's encountering other people not as threats or consumers or resources, but as partners, as equals. One of the most important ways we can honor other people is not by giving them stuff again and again but by allowing them to give to us. To say to them, your story, your experiences, your life is of interest to me, it is of interest to the church, and it is of interest to God. And we think you have something to offer.

All of which brings us back to the banquet. When we gather around this table, God's banquet, every week, Christ is the host. It is Christ who feeds us with words of grace and truth. It is Christ who sets a table where there is no hierarchy. A table where no one is closer to the head and no one is left by themselves. A table where, as our hymn of the day puts it, "the harvest will not be hoarded so that no one will lack for food."

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But Christ is also the guest. Because Christ is present among all who gather at this table. When Christ says, “Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” he promises that he will be present among them. When we say that Christ is present in this sacrament, we don’t just mean that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. We also mean that Christ is present among all who gather here. That Christ is among those who are strangers, those who are the forgotten, and those who we falsely believe have nothing to offer us.

For by suffering the shame we foist on one another, Christ brings honor to all God’s people. And by becoming an unwelcome guest, Christ makes us generous hosts.

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