

12 Pentecost, Proper 17, Yr. C,
September 1, 2019
Sirach 10:12-18, Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Today's reading finds Jesus as a dinner guest. But it must be a tense atmosphere. Jesus has healed some people on the Sabbath and the text says that they were watching him closely. But Jesus was watching them closely as well and, after seeing them elbowing each other to get the places of honor, he makes a couple of comments, phrasing the first one as a parable about people who try to sit in the highest places and who are disgraced if someone more distinguished comes in and they are asked to move to a lower place. Is this relevant to us?

Jesus was living in an honor/shame society. People feared public shame and desired public honor. In this Greco-Roman society, it was all about status and reputation. Hence the desire for the highest seats, those seats that had something to say about one's prestige or wealth or position. It was also about reciprocity. In Greco-Roman society, there were patrons and clients. The patrons got honor through their largesse toward their clients and the clients reciprocated with gratitude and loyalty. Jesus critiques the behavior of both the guests, in their jockeying for position, but also the host for his limited vision of who deserved a place at his table. While we don't live in an honor/shame society and we usually don't worry too much about who is sitting where, we still have a bit of this – for instance at diplomatic occasions where the correct seating protocol is crucial and perhaps closer to home, where the best seats at sports stadiums are reserved for VIPs or big donors. I think a number of us have read *A Gentleman in Moscow*. If you read it, you'll remember that the protagonist was hired by the US -CIA to observe the Communist party seating arrangements at dinners because by analyzing those arrangements they could tell who was in power and who wasn't.

But there's something more here, around this vying for the best seats, that exposes something about human nature. Perhaps what's really going on here is a reflection of our deep-seated insecurity about our own worth. Most often, we're tempted to see each other as competitors. We may not

be trying to get the best seats, but we DO want success and status and power. We want recognition, we want the assurance that we are important enough to be included, to be listened to. At bottom, we want to be assured that we MATTER, that our concerns will be heard, that we'll be included and respected. Richard and I were having a conversation about something a couple of weeks ago, about including people and he said, "That's right; nobody gets left out." Exactly.

Thinking of being respected, I read an anecdote about a new greeter at a Wal-Mart store. He was great at the job – always friendly and accommodating and well-liked by customers and staff alike. There was only one problem – he was always late for work. The manager waited for a few weeks and finally decided he had to talk to him. He knew the fellow had served in the military so, when he talked to him, that's where he started. He said how much they appreciated his work but how it was really necessary that he come in on time. And then he asked, "I know you were in the military. What did they say when you showed up late?" The fellow replied, "Oh, they just said, 'Good morning, Admiral, would you like some coffee?'"

That story illustrates another point I think this text makes and that is, if we have confidence in who we are or what we are doing, vying for position and status and recognition isn't necessary. It's when we're insecure about that, when we rely on outside opinion and approval, that we get into trouble. As someone once said, if that's the game we're playing, it's a bit like musical chairs because there will never be enough prominence, or approval to compensate for our deep insecurity. But there's an answer to that – and that is to have confidence in the deep truth that we are, first and foremost, beloved sons and daughters of God and that's enough. We don't have to go anywhere, do anything, be anybody different – each of us is enough just as we are. Each of us is already infinitely loved. Get your head and your heart around that, Jesus says, and you'll be totally secure. And then you can live your life generously and freely. You can stop worrying about vying for position, you can be hospitable to all of life, including extending your circle to include all those who can never repay you, because you will have

figured out that life, true life, has nothing to do with power and status and everything to do with love.

The other thing that's front and center in both the Sirach reading and the gospel has to do with humility. Sirach is part of what's known as the wisdom tradition, and it was used to educate young men in the art of navigating society and getting ahead. You can see the link to the gospel – don't put yourself forward. But, when you think about it, it seems more like enlightened self-interest than true humility. You'll get further ahead by hanging back a bit, not blowing your own horn. It's a kind of false humility. Humility is a hard thing to get hold of. Did you hear the story about the little boy who was pretty cocky and he was called up before the Head of School who suggested he needed to be more humble. So he was, for a bit, but then he fell back into his old self. "So, then," asked the Head, "What about the humility?" "I WAS humble for a whole fortnight," replied the boy, "but nobody noticed."

Many of us were raised with the idea that humility had to do with a kind of breast-beating, I'm worthless, attitude. But that's not actually the case. I know I've said this before, but it bears repeating: Humility is about being clear-eyed about who we are. It recognizes gifts as well as short-comings. Here's another good story about knowing one's gifts and one's place: Henry Rowland was a professor of physics at Johns Hopkins and was once called as an expert witness. During cross examination, a lawyer demanded to know his qualifications. The normally modest and retiring professor replied, "I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion." Later a friend expressed his surprise at the professor's uncharacteristic answer. Rowland replied, "Well, what did you expect me to say? I was under oath!"

I don't think any of this is easy. All of the culture tells us that what matters is position and power – to be the biggest and the best, to be entitled, to be on top. John Claypool tells about living in the Southwest and finding out something interesting about stagecoaches. Turns out that there were three levels of tickets. But the distinction didn't have to do with where you sat. Rather, it had to do with what was required of you if there was a problem.

First class folks got to stay in the coach when it was mired in the mud. Second class tickets meant that if the coach was mired in mud you had to get out and walk. Third class people had to get out and work in the mud with the driver to solve the problem. Like the seating arrangement at the table, this is a reflection of prestige and position. But Jesus has a different message. One of the accusations leveled at Christians was that they were turning the world upside down. And, indeed, that IS what Jesus was about. He was about creating a new order, one of justice and peace and love. One in which, rather than pushing others out of the way in a free-for-all competition, he demonstrated something completely different. He demonstrated that it was about self-emptying and service. Remember the Last Supper in which John says that "Jesus, knowing that he came from God and was going to God, got up from the table, laid aside his garment, wrapped himself in a towel and proceeded to wash the feet of his twelve disciples. When he was finished he told them: I HAVE MODELED FOR YOU WHO I AM AND WHO YOU ARE. THIS IS WHAT IT'S ABOUT. THIS IS THE TRUE SECRET OF GREATNESS, NOT TO LORD IT OVER ONE ANOTHER, BUT TO BE SO CONFIDENT OF WHO YOU ARE THAT YOUR EGO NEEDS HAVE BEEN MET BY THE GRACE OF GOD, LEAVING YOU FREE TO LOVE AND SERVE AS GOD DOES. Welcome to the Kingdom. Amen.