

Theme: "Party Porticols" /labor day Luke 14:1, 7-14 (C) 12 Pentecost
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I always hesitate to start a sermon with, "Many of you may remember..." because quite frankly, it leaves some people out of the conversation if they aren't familiar with the reference itself, especially if it's a generational thing. But I'm going to do it anyways. *Many of you may remember* the name, Emily Post, and her books on etiquette. For those of you who aren't familiar with the name, Emily Post was "the" spokesperson for what was considered the norms or the set of informal social rules and accepted behaviors within a particular setting, social class or group. These behaviors were to act as a guide for polite and gracious conduct in various situations. In fact, there's actually an Emily Post Institute now with a modern guide on etiquette to navigating professionalism. Good etiquette, you see, helps foster positive social relationships and can make it more pleasant for everyone gathered in varied settings. Etiquette consists of accepted social customs for polite and respectful behavior to prevent awkwardness and fostering kindness. We all strive for that when we throw a party, right?

But as we delve into our gospel lesson today, I think Jesus is teaching his hosts (the leaders of the Pharisees)...and maybe us, too, a little bit more than etiquette or social rules. Because Jesus, you see, is in the business of turning dinner party protocol upside down. He is upsetting the apple cart, so to speak. Because the system of rules that dictate correct conduct - etiquette - within the kingdom of God look nothing like the party he was invited to that day at the home of the Pharisees. And I have to wonder if his hosts knew what they were getting themselves into when they added Jesus to the guest list of their dinner party. Afterall, Jesus wasn't always known for using "proper etiquette" or protocol when he accepted the many dinner invitations during the years of his ministry. Some of those mealtime scenes usually ended in drama, provocation, and yes, scandal.

Remember the time when a woman of questionable reputation caressed his feet under the table? Or when he interrupted a meal to heal sick people? Needless to say...on the Sabbath! And he most likely ate with dirty hands and shared a table with riff-raff in town? But worst of all - he *said* things. Blunt, embarrassing things many people didn't care to hear. Jesus you see, upset the etiquette and reversed the party protocol as the people knew it. Honestly, I'm not sure Jesus would be on my A-list of dinner guests, especially if I wanted to keep the status quo and deem the dinner a success. Which would mean no harsh words, or political discourse or talks of immigration, religion, racism, or governmental policy or...you name it. We all know where those conversations lead when seated around the dinner table with family and friends.

Just imagine the scene in Luke's parable where Jesus enters the Pharisee's house, looks around the room, sees the grown men jostling and shoving each other, pretending to act with dignity for prestigious spots near the host, I can kind of understand why Jesus calls them out. Knowing full well the social rules of his day, he shuns them and calls instead for a revolution, so to speak. Not a revolution of arms and bloodshed, but a revolution in table manners. A radical reversal of party protocol.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, Jesus said, don't sit down at the place of honor, in case someone else with a higher status than you comes in and the host asks you to move down a few seats so the distinguished guest can be closer to the head of the table. It would be embarrassing. And in a world of shame-based culture, it would have been disastrous to your reputation! Instead, Jesus says, sit in the lowest place so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; and then, then... you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

The correct order of seating was of vital importance at a banquet of this type. (Look at how much time people spend on seating arrangements when the invitations go out for a wedding. It's big business for those who come up with

the fancy placeholders with the guests names on them.) But at the time of Jesus, what place you held at the table was actually dictated by a type of annual performance review for such placements! Position you see, was not just a matter of individual achievement. It was a community value. Their placement at the table became representative of their life and identity in society. And most to be feared... was losing face. It was almost like losing one's life. (church pews)!?

And if Jesus' advice to the *guests* wasn't counter-cultural enough, Jesus turns to *the host* and continues with the story. *He tells the host that when he invites people to a dinner, don't 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. When you host a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then...then you will be blessed. And why? Because they can't reciprocate!!!* I'm not sure if this is my kind of party, or not.

The writer of Luke doesn't allude to how Jesus' listeners reacted. We don't know if they laughed, shook their heads in disbelief, questioned Jesus' sanity, argued back, or...followed his advice. All I know is how I reacted this week as I read and re-read this story. I felt a bit uncomfortable at what Jesus is really asking. Even a bit anxious at who should be on *my* invitation list for my next party. Does he really have any idea what he is asking? It appears he does. You know, every once in a while, just as I'm growing comfortable with my faith and "kingdom" protocol, a story like this one comes along to shatter my complacency. Maybe yours, too. Don't exalt myself? Don't insist on the recognition I deserve if I throw the party of the year? Open my heart and home to people who can do nothing for me in return? People I have no affinity for? Can you see why Jesus may not make the A-list for my party? Why on earth should I do that?

Because, when Jesus sets the table, everyone is welcome. Jesus insists on it. Because this is who God is, the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. There is no who is "in" and who is "out" in Jesus' book of etiquette. The party protocol of God ...knows that our anxious scramble for the best seat at the table will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred,

and more devastation. Because God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are *already* welcome, *already* loved, *already* cherished. The protocol of *that* kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear.

But let's face it: humility is a tricky thing. Even if we manage to define it in healthy ways, sometimes humility betrays us; the very instant at which I claim to achieve humility is the moment when it eludes me. Writer Debie Thomas says that, "To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our boardrooms, our college admissions, committees, our church politics, our national politics, our global discourse...and that can be tiring. And if I'm reading Luke's story correctly, I believe that Jesus would usher those who mandate a seat the head of the table - those who lead with a heavy hand and hard heart - right smack dab to the bottom of the invitation list - but much to my dismay...he does not cross them off the list entirely.

Position, you see, is not just a matter of individual achievement, it is a community value. The table is already set and we are invited to the banquet. The party protocol, however, is not about what to wear, what dish to pass, and who will invite me back. No...Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table...matters... because it does - no matter where we sit. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveals the stuff of our souls. Nothing at God's table is ordinary because it's inclusive love that is served. You know, Emily Post may have offered a few good tips about etiquette, but the party protocol is ultimately set by God. And guess what? Maybe I will move Jesus to the A-list on my invitation ledger. How about you? Amen.