

“Give This Person Your Place”

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¹On 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.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”
(Luke 14:1, 7-14)

One summer, when I was about five years old, I was outside in my front yard when I heard kids laughing. Something fun was happening down the street, so I set out to find out what it was. It didn’t take long. A few houses down the street, on the other side of an intersection I was probably not supposed to cross, a kid was having a birthday party. It was a small party only a few select friends of the birthday boy had been invited. But this was clearly where the fun was. They had set up a kiddie pool in their driveway. A running hose kept it full, because there was a lot of splashing. In fact, they had turned an old metal trash can over, and they were using it as a platform to jump into the cool water. It was so hot that day, and it all looked awesome to me. I wanted in. I wanted to go to that party.

The problem was that I didn’t know the birthday boy. In fact, I didn’t know any of those kids. And I sure didn’t know the mom who was lifeguarding beside the pool. But childhood innocence, when employed correctly, can be a very convincing legal defense. I had that going for me, so I went home, put on my bathing suit and flip flops, and headed back out, armed with nothing but a towel and the bold hope of young boy in summer. I walked right up to this woman whom I did not know, put a big smile on, and asked “Am I invited?!?” Apparently, she didn’t have the heart to say no, even though that was the truthful answer. I hopped in the pool and joined the remainder of the party.

The funny thing is that I don’t remember much of the rest of that day, except for a general feeling that it was just a little bit awkward. Does that ever happen to you? You have only hazy recollections of what happened, but somehow what you can recall is how you felt in that moment? What I remember is that I was allowed to stay, but it felt just a little bit uncomfortable.

That kind of social discomfort is at the heart of this parable of Jesus. Having been invited himself to share a meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee, Jesus begins to teach



by telling a story about someone who boldly sat in a place that was not meant for him, a seat he was not invited to take. At first, we may wonder why Jesus is making such a big deal about someone sitting in the wrong seat. Maybe the guy just didn't pay attention to the place cards the host had set around the table. Happens all the time. No big deal.

But in the time and place this story was told, it was a big deal. First of all, things that happen around dinner tables were very important to the writer of the gospel of Luke. There is more teaching, preaching, admonishment, encouragement, and revelation over meals in this gospel than in any other. As the pastor Fred Craddock once wrote, in Luke, there is "nothing... more serious than a dining table."¹

And there was nothing more significant in that culture than a wedding feast. These were the highlight meals of the year. And in the context of Israel and Palestine, it would have been customary for the male guests to recline around the tables on couches, and the couch in the center was widely known to be the place of honor. The guest who would take that couch would be determined by a very clear pecking order based on wealth, power, and political office. Whoever was at the top of that list could recline, but if someone more wealthy, powerful, or connected walked in later – which would often happen – whoever was on that couch would be expected to get up and cede his position to the person of higher rank.² And that could be really awkward.

At one level, this is some very practical social advice. But it is clear that Jesus is interested in much more than social graces. He is speaking about a truth that is much deeper and weightier than that. He wants us to understand something important about the body of Christ and the reign of God – a lesson that reverses our normal understanding of humility and ego.

This reminds me of a story I once heard about a church not far from where I grew up. The members of the church were puzzled by the personality of their pastor. If they saw him at a restaurant or walking around town, he was quiet and humble, even shy. But in the pulpit, he was a fiery orator who spoke boldly. He would even pound on the pulpit to emphasize a particularly passionate point. It was as if he were two different people.

One elder in the church finally got up the courage to ask the pastor straight out. "You know," the elder said, "when you go up to the front of the church on a Sunday morning, it's like you become a completely different person. Why is that?"

The pastor just grinned. "Ah," he said, "That's just my altar ego."

But in all seriousness, ego is no laughing matter in the eyes of God. In this story, Jesus is teaching us to start with humility. It is the same ethic that Paul would later recommend to the church in his letter to the Romans, when he wrote "*I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.*"³ In the life of faith, we can easily, as my grandmother would have said, "get a little too big for our britches." We can call it pride, ego, arrogance, narcissism – whatever we might label it, it is not hard to fall into a trap of thinking that we deserve a little more than others, that we've earned some special

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 175.

² Emilie M. Townes, "Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, Ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 22.

³ Romans 12:3.

treatment, that a certain spot is owed to us or made for us. Jesus teaches us that, when we realize we are thinking like that, the best spiritual practice is to back off and defer to others, trusting that if we really do deserve that coveted place, God will put us there.

It requires a pretty high level of trust, because it is such a radical shift away from our normal mentality. It's a countercultural move, because this kind of thinking is not what we normally think of as leading to success. It is not how we get admitted into our college of choice. It is not how we land a job, get a promotion, or earn a raise. These do not seem like times to be humble or deferential. These are times to advocate strongly for ourselves... to put our very best foot forward... to puff ourselves up and perhaps even get a little pushy. Like the Kori Bustard.

The Kori Bustard is the largest flying bird native to Africa. In fact, the male Kori Bustard may be the heaviest living animal capable of flight. When it is time for Kori Bustards to mate, the males gather themselves into a big group. They then immediately try to stand apart -- to distinguish themselves enough to catch the attention of the females. They turn their heads backwards, open their bills to inhale as much air as possible, and inflate their "gular pouches," which are really just big throat balloons. Their gullets can blow up to as much as four times their normal size. As a final flourish, they splay out their gleaming white neck feathers, which are so bright they are visible more than half a mile away. At this point, they spread their wings and start strutting.⁴ And, apparently, the female Kori Bustards dig it.

Before this week, I'd never heard of this amazing African bird. But I do know the behavior. We all do. Most of us are programmed from a very early age to strive for success, and early on we learn that achieving success means beating the competition. We are told that getting what we need and want in life is a lot like a family full of hungry siblings at dinnertime all staring at one plate of biscuits in the center of the table. As the blessing begins to draw to a close, you know that as soon as you hear that "Amen" you better be ready to throw some elbows and grab what you can or that plate will be empty by the time it gets to you. I hope you'll excuse me for saying it, but I think it's true, that when we fallible humans start eyeing a plate of biscuits, or coveting the best seats at the tables of life, we can pretty quickly turn into real "male Kori Bustards."

In short, what Jesus is recommending to us is, in many ways, the opposite of what we are taught. It is just one more example of the "great reversal" that Christ represents – a new life in which we do not hate our enemies, but love them and pray for them... a life in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first... a life which can only be found if we are willing to lose the life we have.

It is a constant challenge for anyone who wants to take Christian faith seriously. And in this lesson, the challenge is this: "Am I willing to give up my seat for someone else?" If we struggle to do that on a train, how much more difficult will it be for us when it comes to things like access to health care... access to loans and financial markets... access to higher education? We in this room have enjoyed some pretty good seats at those tables. We have enjoyed the world's parties. But this parable suggests that the parties and banquets that honor God are not like the world's parties. In fact, God has some pretty different ideas on who gets in the door to those parties, as well as how the cake is shared. Are we willing to be OK with that? Are we ready to follow the lead of our Host and take real notice of the people

⁴ "Kori bustard," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kori_bustard, accessed August 25, 2022.

who have never really been invited to the world's parties – the people who have always been on the outside looking in – the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the people who cannot pay us back when we are generous to them? Are we willing to give our place at the table to someone else who needs it more, perhaps even deserves it more?

May God give us the courage and the will to say “Yes, Lord, I will.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ***Amen.***